

Sermon for Thornapple 12-13 February 2011

Exodus 20:3-5

“Sandcastles and idolatry”

Word count: 1452

Here are some sandcastles we built. How impressive, how intricate, look at all that detail, here's one with over 100 castles. That took nearly all day. And then look what happened. The tide came in and one wave and this is all that was left. All that work gone!

We have many problems in our world today. One of which is many people are building sandcastles in their lives. They spend enormous amounts of time and energy building them. But when tough times come they are washed away.

Let's read our passage of Scripture together.

Exodus 20:3-5

The question we are going to ask ourselves today is “What other gods do we put before God?”

The answer is – counterfeit gods or idols. This passage in Exodus tells us is that anything in this world can serve as an idol, a counterfeit god. I am sure you know that you can make a god out of money, even out of sex.

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. Anything you seek, to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit God is anything so central and essential to your life that should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such control of your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources on it without a second thought.

An idol is when you look at something and say in your heart of hearts, “If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.”

In ancient times pagans saw everything as gods – sex gods, work gods, war gods, nation gods and they created physical representations which they then worshipped.

We feel we are sophisticated. We do not create physical gods out of stone or wood anymore – we don't worship false gods do we?

But God knows our hearts. The biblical concept of idolatry is an extremely sophisticated idea. There are personal idols such as romantic love and family; or money, power and achievement; even access to particular social circles or emotional dependence of others on you; health, fitness, physical beauty. These are things people look to to provide them with hope, meaning and fulfilment.

There are cultural idols such as military power, technological progress, economic prosperity. Idols of traditional societies include family, hard work, duty and moral virtue. Western culture idolises individual freedom, self-discovery, personal affluence and personal fulfilment. In Africa the spiritual world is a source of great fear. Power and position is an idol, no matter how far down the ladder I am, there is always someone lower than me that I can exercise power over, just see how a bank teller treats a person standing on the other side. People trust money and wealth, if I can just give my kids an education, if I can make a lot of money in business, we will be safe and secure. External appearance, how I am perceived, I wear a suit, I have a title, I have my hair done, all to lift me up higher.

What about honour, and shame? (big in Africa). Morality is defined not in terms of absolutes, but in terms of getting found out and bringing dishonour. Community, the extended family, the group. While western culture deifies the individual, often Zim culture deifies the group. So I act in ways which are wrong simply because of the pressure of the family.

Intellectual idols are often called ideologies. In the business world the idol is profit. In the world of art it is self-expression. There are idols everywhere. All these things are good things but when they become too strong and too powerful in our lives they become idols, false gods.

The Bible uses 3 pictures to describe how people relate to these false idols. They love idols, they trust idols and they obey idols.

When we love idols it is like a marriage. When we desire and delight in anything other than God, we commit spiritual idolatry – Hosea 1:2. Romance or success can become false lovers that promise to make us feel loved and valued. These and other idols pull us away from God. Idols capture our imagination and we can identify these idols by looking at our daydreams. What do we enjoy imagining? What are your fondest dreams? We look to these idols to provide us with love, value, significance and worth.

When we trust idols we look to them for salvation. We look to these idols for peace and security through personal achievement or financial prosperity – Jeremiah 2:28. These idols give us a sense of being in control and we can identify these idols by looking at our nightmares. What do we fear the most? What would make our lives not worth living if we lost it? To these idols we are willing to sacrifice and appease them, hoping to please them.

When we obey idols they become our lord and master. Whatever we love and trust, we will serve. Anything that becomes more important to us than God becomes an enslaving idol – Romans 1:25-26. We can identify these idols by looking at our most unyielding emotions. What makes us uncontrollably angry, anxious or despondent? What makes us feel so guilty we cannot shake it? Idols control us because we feel that life is meaningless if we do not have them.

We live in a culture full of gods. Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. We have our own set of “priests” and totems and rituals. We even have shrines – office towers, gyms, stadiums – where sacrifices are made every day. We may not physically kneel before a statue but we worship them just the same and sacrifice our lives, bodies, children, families, reputations before them. Tiger Woods sacrificing his wife and children for sex. Bernard Madoff sacrificing his reputation for profit and saving face.

Why do we do these things? Ezekiel 14:3. The Bible says it is because the human heart is an idol factory. The human heart is able to take good things and turn them into ultimate things.

Mankind does not like to hear these things but in recent years many of these false idols have been exposed and they have failed. The global economic crisis, the failure of all human ideologies – humanism, communism, even capitalism. The failure of high profile super stars, politicians and even church leaders. We face a unique opportunity in our world today. People have become disenchanted by the things of the world and they are looking for things they can love, trust and obey, things that will not let them down. The word disenchanted is a good one as it means to come out from under a spell. With the global economy in shambles, with what has happened in Zimbabwe in the past 10 years, many of the idols that we have worshipped have come crashing down.

So how do we move forward out of despair? Firstly, we must identify the idols of our hearts, our culture and society.

But you know you cannot simply remove an idol. The only way to be free from the destructive influence of these false gods is to turn back to the One True and Living God. The God who revealed Himself on Mount Sinai and on the Cross. If we can find this God and put Him first in our lives we will find love, value, peace, security and a Lord and Master who will never let us down.

This is a message for all of us BUT it is also a message that the world out there needs to hear. Your Community needs to hear this, my country needs to hear this.

I started with sandcastles. False idols are like those sandcastles. We spend an enormous amount of time and resources building them but when the waves come they fail and very soon they are gone.

Our Ruwadzano ladies had an all night prayer meeting recently and the theme was Matthew 6:24. The question today is who or what are you serving? Who takes the number one place in your life? If you really want to deal with this, you are going to need help as idols are good at hiding themselves. Firstly you need to ask God to help you. Ask God to fill you with His Spirit so that you can search your heart and see what God sees. Secondly, you need to ask help from the church. Come and talk to one of the leaders here and ask them to help you.