



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 11 October by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Molten Bovine

Exodus 32.1-14 and Matthew 22.1-14.

Surely God drives a Honda.

Despite all the years of my theological training, unfortunately, I can't actually tell you what sort of car God would drive. I'm just making this guess because, at the Day of Pentecost, we read that Christ's 120 disciples were '*all in one accord*' (Acts 2.1). Likewise, in St John's Gospel, Christ traditionally gave seven signs of His divinity. With that many signs, or indicators, we know that He definitely didn't drive a BMW. Of course, I make this assumption about the Almighty's driving habits because I currently drive a Honda.

Running with the same reasoning, surely God wears knitted woollen jumpers because He knit us together in our mother's wombs (Psalm 139.13) and knit Job together with bones and sinews (Job 10.11). Surely, God sits down in the evening with a tall glass of gin and tonic because He promised the exiles that He would fill the barren deserts with juniper shrubs (Isaiah 41.19). Surely, God loves traditional worship because the Scriptures mention incense but don't bother to write about guitars. Of course, it has nothing to do with me wearing knitted jumpers, drinking gin, or personally preferring traditional worship.

It is remarkable, even ridiculous, how much our perceptions of God reflect us like a mirror. God shares our opinions. God likes our music. God would vote the same way that we do. What an extraordinary coincidence.

Instead of recognising that we are made in the Image of God, we start projecting an image of ourselves onto God. If God's nature and opinions are conveniently identical to our own, then God becomes much easier to understand. We need never be unsettled, challenged, or confronted by the mystery of a God who is something other than us.

In Exodus, we see this temptation in action. Moses has disappeared up Mount Sinai, and the Hebrews become anxious. Faced with uncertainty, they make

things rather more straightforward: Aaron, the high priest, melts down their gold and fashions it into a calf. Faced with the mysterious and divine, they have produced a god they can understand. A god they can see; a god they can touch; a god who stays put; and a god they have made themselves.

There is something wonderfully absurd about the whole narrative. The God of Salvation has liberated His people from slavery, parted the Red Sea, led them through the wilderness, and yet now they have decided that what they need above all else is a model of a golden cow.

But perhaps it isn't quite as ridiculous as it first appears. The attraction of the golden calf is control. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is inconveniently free. God disappears into clouds. God makes demands. God calls people into the unknown. God has the deeply irritating habit of surprising us and refusing to behave exactly as we would like Him to. The calf, however, is much easier. It's static, constant, predictable.

And we are still remarkably good at making golden calves. Not literally. I've not recently seen anyone melting down the treasures of this Cathedral and fashioning them into a golden swan or similar. But we still create gods who reassure us that we are right.

There is a conservative God who agrees with conservative people and a progressive God who agrees with progressive people. There is an English God, an American God, a capitalist God, a socialist God. There is even a God who apparently hates all the people we hate and is deeply suspicious of everyone we already find suspicious.

That ought to make a Christian nervous. Because if God never challenges us, never unsettles us, never asks us to reconsider anything or to love somebody we would rather avoid, then there is at least a possibility that the voice we are worshipping is simply our own voice echoing back at us.

This matters beyond the walls of our ecclesial community. We are living through a time in which it feels increasingly easy to divide the world into us and them. We are encouraged to believe that our problems have simple causes and identifiable culprits. That if only other people behaved differently, worshipped differently, looked differently, came from somewhere else - or perhaps went somewhere else - then everything would be all right.

Our complicated world is frightening; a golden calf is simple. It gives our justifiable anxiety a shape. It reassures us who belongs and who doesn't. It tells us who is righteous and who is dangerous. It tells us that people like us are basically good and people unlike us are probably the problem.

But then, in the Gospel according to St Matthew, God does something very different. In the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, the king sends his servants into the streets: *'Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet'*. The Evangelist drives home the point, writing that they gather

‘all whom they found, both good and bad’. What a wonderfully indiscriminate guest list. The kingdom of heaven is suddenly filled with people who were never expected to be there. Shouldn’t the Church be like that?

While human beings are endlessly deciding who is in and who is out, God keeps sending servants down the road to find more chairs. While we construct ever smaller definitions of belonging, God seems determined to make the table bigger. God calls and it is God who chooses, not us. Christian faith can never comfortably become a religious justification for deciding that some human beings matter less than others. We may disagree profoundly about politics. Christians may disagree in good faith about migration, taxation, policing, and the responsibilities of government. Yet, there is still a line that Christians cannot cross.

We cannot turn another human being into a category before they are a person. We cannot neglect to see the Image of God in somebody because of their passport, their poverty, their religion, their race, their sexuality, or their gender. Because the moment our politics requires us to believe that another human being possesses less dignity than we do, then we have begun gathering our gold. We are making God in our own image again.

This is where our two readings meet. In Exodus, humanity makes a god and prepares its own feast around it. In Matthew, God prepares the feast and humanity is invited simply to come. Those are two very different ways of living. We can spend our lives constructing little worlds in which we are secure, certain and correct, surrounded by people who think like us, vote like us, read like us, worship like us. Or we can come to God’s feast. And God’s feast is much more dangerous. Because at God’s table, we may discover ourselves sitting beside somebody we would never have invited.

Shortly, we ourselves will come again to God’s table. We will come carrying our politics, our prejudices, our fears, our certainties, and our anxieties about the future. We will come from left and right, from different backgrounds, and with different convictions.

Disagreement and diversity are not the problem; contempt of other human beings, however, is. The moment we need another human being to be worth less in order for us to feel worthy, we have begun melting down the gold. The moment we need somebody to be an outsider so that we can feel secure in belonging, we have begun fashioning the calf. The moment patriotism requires somebody else’s humiliation; the moment politics depends upon somebody else’s dehumanisation; the moment religion teaches us whom we need not love: whatever name we give it, it is not the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is an idol. Idols are attractive because they look like us. The living God does not look like us; we look like Him.

The living God, embodying the equality of the *Imago Dei*, stretches out His arms upon the cross towards those we would rather keep at arm’s length. The living

God sends His servants into the streets to gather the people we would have forgotten. The living God fills His banquet with all people and sits us beside one another. That is the scandal of the feast.

In just a few moments, we cannot receive the Body and Blood of Christ while pretending that the person beside us possesses any less human dignity. We cannot say 'Amen' to Christ while refusing to recognise His image in our neighbour. We cannot receive this holy sacrament to our comfort without knowing that it places us in communion with one another.

We are given a choice: we can build the calf, or we can come to the feast. We can worship the comfortable little gods who confirm that we were right all along, or we can encounter the living God who commands us to love people we did not choose. We can make God in our image, or we can allow God to show us that we are made in His.

The gold is already in our hands; however, the table is already laid. Make your choice. Come to the feast.

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11 October 2026