

As for our God, he is in heaven: he hath done whatsoever pleased him. *Psalms 115.3.*

What is the Number One sin in the Bible? Sex outside marriage? Stealing? Lying? Nope! It's idolatry. Idolatry? Surely not? That's not much of a sin, is it? When you look at dreadful things like the Holocaust, the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Robert Mugabe, surely there are more important things than idolatry?

Well, actually there aren't, because what I want to suggest to you today is that all those historical evils I have just referred to, and all our present-day horrors and injustices stem from this number-one sin of idolatry. If you go into battle with the wrong battle-plan, you will lose. If you try to run a government with the wrong political programme, you will fail. If you start to put up a building with the wrong plans, it will fall down. Why? Because your materials are wrong, your assumptions are false, your ideas are half-cocked. And so it is exactly with idolatry. If you are worshipping false gods, it means that you are celebrating and honouring wrong values. Your priorities are wrong, and your assumptions are misguided.

Why am I talking about this? Because many months ago Adrian, our organists, decided the choir should tackle one of the hardest and most spectacular anthems in the choir repertoire, Samuel Sebastian Wesley's *Ascribe Unto The Lord*. SS Wesley was one of the great English composers of English choral music. He rescued English church music from the dire condition it had fallen into by the end of the 18thC. He was the grandson of the famous Charles Wesley, and was the first

organist of the new Leeds Parish Church. We are singing his hymn tunes today. He named many of them after local places like Wetherby and Harewood. The anthem *Ascribe unto the Lord* is horrifically difficult, but we are not trying to provide a concert for you, but to present two Biblical texts from *Psalm* 96 and 115, whose subject is, guess what? - idolatry.

The anthem begins with words from *Ps* 96, 'Ascribe unto the Lord worship and power'. Solzhenitsyn, the great 20thC novelist and Russian dissident, summed up the times when he said that the characteristic trait of the 20thC is that it rejected God. So, if we have pushed God out of our lives, to whom do we ascribe worship and power? In our celebrity culture, it is to David Beckham, Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss. It is to politicians and revolutionaries who promise us a new earth, a new order of things. In our crazy, upside world there are even people ascribing heroic status to murderers like Raoul Moat. 'We will never forget you'. 'You are a legend', the tributes say. This is what happens when people turn away from God. So the point of the scripture is, 'Ascribe unto the *Lord* worship and power, and honour', because, if we don't, we will ascribe it to trash which we make godlike.

Wesley then takes words from *Ps* 115, 'As for the gods of the heathen, they are but idols'. He brilliantly has the music falling down in semitones, like statues tumbling down. V4 of the Psalm says, 'Their idols are silver and gold'. You will then hear the choir sing a wonderfully comic setting of vv5-7: *They have mouths..and speak not; eyes have they...and see not; they have ears, and hear not; noses have they and smell not.*

The music is very jerky and then moves into a dismal setting of 'They that make them are like unto them'.

But then, the whole tone changes. We now get massive, solid chords, solid as a rock as the choir sings, 'As for our God, he is in heaven; he hath done whatsoever pleased him'. What a contrast between the fragility of the false gods of Baal and Moloch, and the absolute solidity of the real God, Jehovah, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

But, though SS Wesly does this brilliantly, as you will hear, this is not mere word-painting. The fact is that the gods of the heathen really are idols. They are nothing but silver and gold statues, the work of man's hands with no basis in reality. Now of course, we don't worship Baal these days, but, though we have turned our backs on God, we still worship false gods. I have already mentioned how we are into celebrities, heroes, icons as never before. It's all Hollywood, football, fashion, pop stars.

But it's worse even than that. People may not worship Baal anymore, but they have made a god out of nationalism. Isn't that what Hitler did? Isn't it what the Serbs did in Kosovo and Bosnia? And what did we end up with but genocide and ethnic cleansing, all in the name of the false god of nationalism, the worship of the nation and the pure race?

And ideologies like Marxist communism have turned the state into a god, so that no longer does the state exist for the good of the individual, but the individual exists for the sake of the totalitarian state, which demands total worship and allegiance. How many millions have been murdered,

imprisoned, oppressed in Russia, China, Africa, Latin America in the name of Marxism?

And in the west we have rejected God for the god of materialism and consumerism and individualism. And where have these false gods taken us? Materialism has taken away our inner life. That's why so many are on drugs. There's nothing but the here and now and what you can see and touch. Our people are hungry inside, empty. Their gods have failed them, and so recreational drugs fill the void. Why aren't I on drugs? Haven't I had my sorrows and challenges? But I have something inside here. I don't need the false god of drugs and drink to make me happy, to save me from the pointlessness and emptiness of living. I put my trust in Jesus my Saviour.

Materialism, consumerism, and individualism are false gods which have failed us. Individualism has simply isolated people, made them selfish and ultimately lonely. Who wants that? Rejecting God for idols is not a consequence-free decision. It has wrecked out society. Our gods have failed us.

Our most pressing need is to get back to God, to the *true* God whom we meet in the Bible and in the face of Jesus Christ. Only *he* can truly save. Only *he* can truly make people happy and at peace. The devil is keeping us from seeing this. But *our* God, the true God, is in heaven, not just a figment in our minds. He exists independent of us, and 'hath done whatsoever pleased him'. When we get back to him, he shall truly bless us. And so SS Wesley's great choral anthem ends with vv12-15:

*The Lord hath been mindful of us, and he shall bless us. He shall bless them that fear the Lord, both small and great. The Lord shall increase you more and more, you and your children. Ye are the blessed of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*