

## EXODUS 20:4-6

(Readings: WSC 49 - 52; Heb.11:1-3,27b; Deut.4:15-31)

### The 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

There is a common misunderstanding with this second commandment.

It's also probably the reason why some denominations have joined the first and second commandments together, and split the tenth, as we heard of last week.

The misunderstanding is this: They believe that our second commandment is about worshipping other gods.

In other words, it illustrates to them how the first commandment is broken.

They assume it must therefore be part of the first commandment.

The reading from Deuteronomy chapter 4 showed, however, that the LORD is actually prohibiting symbolical representations of Himself.

Two words showing this in verse 4 of our text, also appear in Deuteronomy 4.

Our Bible translation, the N.I.V., isn't helpful here.

It translates those words, "an idol in the form of anything."

The N.A.S.B. however, translates it, "an idol, **or** any likeness of what is."

The New King James says, "any carved image, or any likeness of anything."

So these two translations keep the two words distinct, and through the phrase "any likeness of" shows us what Deuteronomy 4 explains further - which is, the real point is about misrepresenting God Himself.

As someone has pointed out, the difference between the 1st and 2nd commandments is the difference between idol-olatri and ikon-olatri.

This helps to explain the 'Golden Calf' incident in Exodus 32.

For that situation wasn't actually the people worshipping another god - it was the people trying to make an image of their God.

So it wasn't so bad after all - was it?

I mean, if it's an aid, a help to get them closer to God, to make Him more meaningful in their lives, surely it can't be too bad?

Congregation, there you have the whole rationale behind many of the so-called "high" churches - like the Romans Catholic, the 'high' Anglican, and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

They have made a fine art form out of these images.

And who isn't impressed?

Who hasn't gone into one of those huge gothic cathedrals in Europe, some which took hundreds of years to make, and not been overwhelmed?

Who hasn't been stirred by the loud and penetrating sound of one of those huge pipe organs?

And what about those solemn ceremonies in their church year, when all those clergy are bedecked in their finery, surrounded by the uniformed choirs and attendants?

Aren't you moved by the devotion of thousands of pilgrims crawling along the footpath into one of those churches, going to touch or just be near one of their sacred relics?

Inspirational stuff!

Did it catch you too?

And there lies the rub, the devilish deception about the whole thing.

Friend, that's the thing about the LORD.

He knows **you** through and through.

**"You shall not make for yourself..."**

You see, it's not what we are or what we do which should come into this picture at all!

For, in the first place...**WORSHIP BEGINS WITH WHAT YOU DON'T SEE.**

Congregation, let's take Moses as an example from the time of our text.

Let's see how he shows this commandment in practice.

For while the books he wrote don't specifically allude to how he himself lived, our New Testament reading from Hebrews 11 does.

There it is said of Moses, "he persevered because **he saw him who is invisible.**"

Marcus Loane wrote of that verse, "The quality of endurance in the case of Moses had its secret in his vision of Him who is invisible.

"Moses had seen that bush on fire with the glory of God's presence just as Saul of Tarsus was to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus.

"One might have thought that an experience like that, just once a lifetime, would be enough: but that was no more the case with Moses than it was with Saul of Tarsus.

"Moses longed to see God's glory as he travelled through the desert with the tribes of Israel; he was concealed in a cleft of a rock so that he might catch a fleeting glimpse of the divine glory as God passed by.

"He was sustained in the darkest adversity by that vision of a glory that lies beyond the point of sight."

Believer - this is it!

Beyond the point of sight!

It's the same spirit as that of Jesus Christ Himself, of whom it's written in Hebrews 12 verse 2, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame."

WORSHIP BEGINS WITH WHAT YOU DON'T SEE!

This isn't because not seeing is somehow a different thing, or a lesser thing, but because it's a much deeper thing.

Worship begins with such as the doxology that Paul cries out in Romans 11.

There, in the verses 33 till 36, he sings "Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and wonder of God!

"How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?

"Or who has been his counsellor?

"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

"For from him and through him and to him are all things.

"To him be the glory forever!

"Amen."

Now - you go and try to design that!

Capture that on a canvas or carve it into wood or stone, if you can!

Impossible!

So - why do we try?

Moses said as much to the people in Deuteronomy 4, when he begins the section on idolatry being forbidden, by saying, "You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you out of the fire."

In other words - God is greater than **you!**

And God is certainly greater than anything **you** can do!

Ah, but do you believe that?

Congregation, I don't believe it's a coincidence that whenever the LORD has worked genuine reformation and revival among His people that their whole way of public worship is changed around.

In fact, we find at times like that, a return to the simple exposition and guidance of Scripture alone.

All the carry-on and who-ha is gone!

All those involved and intricate ceremonies disappear!

WORSHIP BEGINS WITH WHAT YOU DON'T SEE!

Moses even prophesied this very point in Deuteronomy 4 when he spoke of the future in the Promised Land.

In the verses 28 till 30 there we read, "There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or smell.

"But **if** from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him **if** you look for him with all your **heart** and with all your **soul**."

"When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him."

It starts within - doesn't it?

True worship is spiritual.

The words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth," have their Old Testament line here.

It's not an easy truth.

But, then, to us, which of God's Words really are?

That's why the Catechism takes special pains to explain what this means.

It is very firm in stating in Answer 51 that "the second commandment forbids the worship of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word."

So God can not and may not be visibly portrayed in any way.

This doesn't mean, though, that God is against the arts.

You can paint and draw and write and so on yet God forbids making or having such images if your intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.

It's all a matter of what we use them for.

Which is really the same for anything - isn't it?

So...WORSHIP BEGINS WITH WHAT YOU DON'T SEE...and then, secondly...WORSHIP CONTINUES BECAUSE OF WHAT HE WANTS US TO BE.

Verse 5 says, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for **I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.**"

Having seen that the response of true faith in worship is what's from the heart, and, in fact, it avoids physical things because they distort true religion, we come to what's behind it all.

Or, rather, I should say, **who** is behind it all.

The verses 23 and 24 of Deuteronomy 4 show this.

There we read, "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden.

"For the LORD your God is a **consuming** fire, a **jealous** God."

Dear believer, once you have realised that worship begins with what you don't see, once you have been drawn into the spiritual wonder of what true worship is...aren't you then in **awe** of the One who made you see?

Though it may sound like God thrusts Himself upon His people in the books of Moses, doesn't this really express how God has appeared to us all?

Like Moses, haven't we been struck by who He is and what we aren't?

This is why the Golden Calf incident not only showed the people trying to portray the LORD, it also shows how little faith - if any - they had!

They weren't listening to God - they were trying to be wiser than Him.

This is the completely opposite attitude to Answer 52.

Those Israelites tried to be smarter than God.

They would sort it out themselves.

They were so full of themselves!

But the LORD as the Supreme Lover resents anyone or anything distracting the course of true love.

The people were punished so that they would return to the Lover of their souls.

And, again, let's not think of God here as some severe Judge, just waiting to pounce on any wrong we do.

Let's look instead on what He's doing for **us!**

Rather than seeing the children punished for the sin of their father to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God, let's realise the wonder of verse 6, for the LORD shows love to a thousand generations who love Him and who keep His commandments.

Boys and girls... in your minds add up the difference between the number 4 and the number 1,000.

What does 1,000 minus 4 equal?

Was your answer 996?

**That's** some difference!

Congregation, **this** is what the LORD loves.

In the words of one commentator, "If God continues for a long time His punishment of sin, He continues **to all eternity** showing His mercy, and we cannot have better proof of this than in the history of Israel itself."

WORSHIP CONTINUES BECAUSE OF WHAT HE WANTS US TO BE!

And there's still something else here.

In the last phrase of verse 5, when God expresses His jealousy for His people, notice the phrase, "punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me."

Now this phrase has been misunderstood to mean that those children share the sins of their great grand-parents.

There is that teaching in some churches about so-called "generational curses."

Some have even made up a doctrine that in our biological make-up we're already made up for either heaven or hell.

It's not true.

In fact, the children are punished **if** they continue in the sinful way of their forebears.

If they decide, however, to go the Lord's way, and so repent of what's been done in the past, they actually join with those enjoying God's blessing.

Dear friend, I want to lay that Word also before you now.

As you came to church this morning, did you come because you meant it from the heart, because you see and respect and love this God, or was it just a habit?

You see, all this can become a comfortable style that **you** don't want to change.

But what if **He** wants to change you?

Congregation, we come to meet and hear God; we come to worship and respond to His Word with praise and prayer.

That's why the 2nd Commandment is about **how** we worship the LORD.

It points us to One who desires us so exclusively and extensively to Himself that He's laid out the way how to in His Word.

You see, the Bible speaks!

It's all God-breathed, not like those idols or images, whether real or imagined, that are dead - in fact, they're dead-ends!

It's God's Word, which, to quote 2nd Timothy 3:16, is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

We can also illustrate it this way.

When one country wants to convey a message to another country, she sends an ambassador.

The ambassador speaks words to that government.

The message will be written down.

That ambassador won't give some kind of picture or statue to bring that important message.

He won't perform a dance.

It's the word which is clear!

It's words which cannot be misunderstood!

Congregation, God has spoken to us.

The words are here - in this Book.

In fact, God even sent His highest ranked ambassador - His Son, Jesus Christ - to not just bring that Word but to be the Living Word.

The Living Word who spoke words.

The Living Word who showed in His Life how all these words are absolutely true.

The Living Word, brothers and sisters, boys and girls, young people - the Living Word who died on the cross so that we show these words are true too.

Please - listen!  
Live in the love He's showing to a thousand  
generations.

Indeed, let's be one of them!  
Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Lord Jesus,  
In You we have absolutely everything.  
Nothing here below can give us what we have  
already received by faith in You.

May Your Word continue to go with us in all fullness  
and power.

May we continue to be changed by it and may many  
more come to be converted through it.

In Your saving Name we pray, Amen.