

Publishing Editor's column

IDOL WORSHIP is something we often read about in the Bible. When the Israelites entered the Land, instead of eradicating the idolatry of the Canaanites they began to practise it themselves, as the book of Judges witnesses. During the time from Samuel to Solomon it was largely absent, but in the later years of Solomon's reign it re-emerged, and was prevalent throughout the time of the divided kingdom. Consequently the writings of the prophets frequently condemn it. During the Babylonian captivity the Jews ceased to practise it, and in the New Testament we read of it in relation to the Gentiles among whom the Apostle Paul went to preach the gospel.

Idolatry is not, on the face of it, a feature of modern Western society. However, there are two significant areas where it can be found. Firstly, it is still a prominent feature of oriental religions such as Hinduism, and with the increasing numbers of Asians living in Western countries a Hindu temple full of idols may well exist close to an ecclesial hall. Secondly, it must not be overlooked that in Roman Catholicism praying to various 'saints', especially Mary, and having images representing them, is widespread, and is in effect idolatry. Idolatry is thus more common today than we might think, though it is unlikely to be a snare to most of us as it was to Israel of old.

Recognising that all Scripture is provided for our instruction, we therefore seek to find a way of applying the frequent warnings against idolatry in the Old Testament to our situation today. One obvious way of doing this arises from the common use of the term 'idol' with reference to people prominent in the worlds of sport and entertainment, and by extension the use of the word 'idolise' to refer to the devotion someone might have for such a person. Clearly this is not something which the disciple of Christ should do, but it does not seem to me to get at the essence of idolatry.

Another way in which it is suggested that idolatry might apply today is with reference to excessive devotion to some pursuit outside of the Truth, such as watching television or following an absorbing hobby or interest. Again, this is something which the disciple of Christ needs to avoid, but it does not seem appropriate to think of this as idolatry either.

What is idolatry really all about, then? It is surely about what you place your trust in. People worshipped Baal and Ashtaroth in Old Testament times as nature and fertility deities—powerful beings who controlled the weather and gave good harvests or caused the flocks and herds to have plenty of healthy young. Israelites who worshipped such deities were trusting in beings who had no actual existence, instead of Yahweh, the one Who truly had the power to provide these benefits. People today who pray to Mary or other 'saints' do so trusting that they will provide blessings in their lives, placing their trust in people who at best are unconscious in the grave awaiting the resurrection or at worst never even existed.

So in whom or in what do people in the West place their trust today? It is surely in man-made systems and institutions to provide for their needs, in money and the things money can provide. Scripture also speaks of this sort of thing as idolatry. Job, in proclaiming his innocence from various sins, links placing trust in money with worshipping the heavenly bodies, an early form of idolatry (31:24-28). Jesus said, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). Paul urged rich believers not to "trust in uncertain riches" (1 Tim. 6:17), and says that covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5).

Most of us are removed from any need to trust in God today, for we do not depend on growing our own food and are not therefore directly reliant on the rain and the sun to provide for our needs until the next harvest. Instead we trust that the supermarket will always have what we need and that our jobs will provide the money to pay for it. If not then we trust in the state or various insurance and pension schemes to provide.

Israel often tried to worship both God and idols, hoping for the best of both worlds. Divided allegiance was not then acceptable to God, and is not now. Does the equivalent of idolatry today lie in placing our trust in money, and in the man-made institutions that provide us with money and the things money buys, while at the same time worshipping God? I am not suggesting that we should not make sensible provision for our immediate and future needs; it is a question of what we trust in and what we hope for.

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