

## SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY ROGATE

(Cape Town - 26 April 2008)

**Text:** <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. <sup>8</sup> They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' <sup>9</sup> "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." <sup>11</sup> But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened. (Exodus 32:7-14)

The Israelites had just been rescued from the Egyptians. In fact, their journey into the desert was marked by a number of remarkable rescue acts on the side of God. First, when the Israelites were corned against the Red Sea, and the Egyptian army came charging towards them, God rescued them by opening the sea so that could walk right through to the other side. Then sometime later when they had no more food and were getting quite desperate, they woke up one morning and there was this "bread" all over the desert, which they called "mana". For day they could fill their hungry stomachs with the food which God had provided.

Another day when they were camping somewhere else, they had no water. In their desperation the people turned against Moses. But again Moses prayed to God. And God instructed him to strike a rock with his staff. As he did fresh water came gushing out and they could all satisfy their thirst.

But they had hardly settled in that camp, when the Amalekites, a group of desert nomads, attacked them. But again as Moses cried out to God, he rescued them. As long as Moses lifted his hands towards God in prayer, the Amalekites were defeated. So when Moses tired, and his hands started dropping, others started to support him until the Amalekites eventually

fled into the desert.

These mighty acts of God were not without meaning. They were part of a greater lesson. God was teaching his people that no matter what adversaries or hardships they faced in life, they could always trust him.

The scene of our sermon text is set at the slope of Mount Sinai. It was the same mountain where God had revealed himself to Moses for the first time in a burning bush. At this mountain something quite special was to happen in the history of Israel. God was going to reveal “his will” to his people. So he called Moses onto the mountain. There on the mountain he handed to him in his own writing, written on two stone tablets, what has become known as the “Ten Commandments” of God. These ten commandments were “commandments” of course, but more central was, that they conveyed the heart of a God who had nothing but caring love for his people.

The first commandment is the most central one. It read: “***You shall have no other gods before me.***” It is a commandment that really just confirmed what the Israelites so far had experienced in the desert, and that is: “You can trust me. There is no need to turn to somebody else.”

But while Moses was receiving the written commandments, guess what was happening on the slope of the mountain? When Moses didn’t return as quickly as they thought he would, all their doubts returned again. They were tired of a God whom they couldn’t see, but were called on to trust. They wanted to see.

So they pressured Aaron in “making” this god for them. And Aaron relented. He asked the Israelites to bring all their golden earrings to him. Maybe he expected that they wouldn’t depart from these valuables in their life. But surprisingly they did. For a god they could see, they were prepared to make a “sacrifice”. Aaron, it seems, had no choice. Maybe he himself started to doubt. With the gold he made a calf, which in some way was a replica of the god of the Canaanites, called Baal.

So now the Israelites had a god they could see. What they didn’t realise, of course, was that the God who brought them out of Egypt, and called on them to trust him, was *so great* that no person could survive being in his direct presence and “seeing” him. But this God they had swapped for a “thing” they made themselves. They sought life not in the creator, but in creation. They sought life in the things of this world.

How does God react? How does God react when the things of this world are more important, are more cherished, are more sought after, than he is?

The answer is provided in our sermon text. God is angry. In fact, he is so angry that he is ready to wipe his people from the face of the earth. He calls them “stubborn”. And rightly so. After everything he did for them, they still turn away from him. He says, they are “stiff-necked”, meaning what happened at the slope of the mountain was not just a one-off accident. This is how they are. God’s people experience his grace day in and day out, but they don’t really worship him. Everything else seems more important than he is. Not for him, but for a man made calf they are prepared to sacrifice their most valued possessions. God says: “I am going to kill them”.

I want so ask you today to be the judge. Is God fair? Is he too harsh on his people? Is he over reacting?. I have been thinking about this, this last week. God is *not* unfair! In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “**The penalty of sin, is death**”. If God gives life, turning away from him, not allowing him to be God, refusing to trust him, deserves nothing else but the loss of life.

But fortunately there is man who had been walking with God for a long time. His name is Moses. And when God declares his readiness to kill his own people, Moses steps into the breach. He places himself between God and his people. And he prays.

From Moses we learn what intercession is.

Intercession means, I pray for others, *because if I don’t, they will be lost*. And interestingly Moses prays here for “God’s people”. He does not pray for those “outside”, not in this prayer at least. He prays for God’s people. Applied to us today: The intercessor prays first and foremost for the “children of God”, those who been baptised in his name, but have exchanged him for a range of other gods. This baptised child of God, is maybe a family member of yours. Maybe it is a friend or a work colleague. The true intercessor knows: This friend desperately needs my prayer. Moses knew: I have to step in the breach because this is a matter of life and death.

Notably Moses makes no excuses for the sin. Not with a single word does he defend the actions of his people. He does not say to God: “God, surely it isn’t so bad. Maybe it was just a ‘slip’. Surely you can overlook this”. That is not what Moses says.

In his prayer Moses runs from the *God of righteous wrath* to the *God of unconditional* love. In doing so he does two things: In his prayer he first defends the honour of God. He says: “God, what will the Egyptians and the other people think, if you destroy your own people?. Yes, they deserve it, but in exercising your wrath they may not see your love. And that is your honour.”

From God's honour Moses turns to God's promises. He says to God: "You promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that you will make their descendants as numerous as the stars". And God says: "Yes, but I will do it through you now." But Moses says: "No, you promised it to them."

And we read in our text: "God relented". God relented because a man was praying. God relented because a man stepped into the breach.

Years later another man stepped into the breach. Moses in his extraordinary selfless actions for-shadowed the man who was to come. The man who came was "in some way" God himself. When God became angry, he decided to put himself into the breach. He did so in Jesus.

History teaches us, man never changed. He remained "stubborn", he remained "stick-nicked". God's grace just isn't seen by man. God is never worshipped and never trusted the way he should be. But when God's wrath boiled over, his wrath encountered his grace. In the breach was Jesus. He took the punishment. He died. And God raised him from the dead. He is now at God's side. And guess what he does? "He intercedes on our behalf." He prays *for us*. We are no different to the Israelites. We are also stubborn and stiff-nicked. But in Jesus God himself is praying for our salvation.

And the moment we start trusting God again, he calls on us to intercede for others in his name. In Jesus, he gives us a promise. He says: "***I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father***" (John 14:13).

How is God glorified? God is glorified, when he is recognised as God. He is glorified when we "fear, love and trust" him above all things.

If you have been wandering away from God, this sermon text appeals to you: "Trust God. Recognise your sin. Turn around. All these other *things* we pursue don't bring life."

And if you have learned to trust God, become an intercessor. Pray for others in the name of Jesus. There is a promise that he will listen to your prayer. You can hold him to that promise. Amen.

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