

OUT CAME THAT CALF

Sung Eucharist

Trinity XVII

St Michael's, Cornhill

Sunday October 12th 2014

One of the most popular films of the early 1990s was that of Richard Curtis' screenplay *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. It combined pathos with high comedy. The last scenes were filmed not far from here in the church of St Bartholomew the Great at Smithfield. The groom suddenly realises that the bride whom he is about to marry is not the woman whom he loves. So off he goes. Elsewhere in the film, we hear Simon Callow being asked by an American wedding guest if he knows Oscar Wilde. 'No', replies Callow, 'but I can give you his fax number.' Later the character Callow plays dies, is mourned by his gay partner, who reads telling lines from W.H. Auden

But one of the episodes which I found particularly ironic was of the young man, also soon to be wed, reflecting on his own parents' marriage: 'They got on very well together – it was a happy marriage – well that is until the divorce...' In some ways, the film had a serious side since it explored key elements of human commitment in different sorts of relationships, not just that of marriage. It explained different attitudes to commitment too – not least in the soundtrack of the film, with the juxtaposition of Tammy Wynette's '*Stand By Your Man*' with Gloria Gaynor's '*I Will Survive*'.

Each of our three readings explores in contrasting ways questions of commitment and loyalty in our religious experience. First, Moses goes up the mountain and experiences what the experts call a *theophany*, that is God in some dramatic way makes himself known to Moses. However, while the cat's away mice immediately begin to play! Aaron, instead of holding Israel to the God who at that moment is appearing to Moses, allows them to cast a golden calf to worship. In the sequel, which we did not hear today, Moses comes down the mountain and remonstrates with Aaron. More than flippantly, Aaron denies responsibility. 'We put in all this gold', says Aaron, 'and then – *out came this calf*?' It is satire almost to the extent of high comedy.

The people of Israel fail to keep to the God who has brought the nation into being. It is a failure of the most profound sort. It is about a new idolatry. Our gospel also explores this theme through story. Jesus tells a parable of a man organising and preparing a wedding and the subsequent feast. We all know well the tale which Jesus tells and it has even issued in a cliché - still alive and kicking in common parlance: 'Go out into the

highways and by-ways.’ But in essence the parable also explores commitment and seriousness in the religious and spiritual life.

Here the wedding imagery is reflecting upon our relationship with God. What are we prepared to put into it? If God is the creator and redeemer of all that is; if without God we would not be; if without God’s love the earth would cease to spin on its axis, what does this require from us? All those first invited to the wedding will not give of themselves. One of the later invitees does come but could not be bothered enough to put on an appropriate outfit.

These themes are, of course, eternal and they are as significant now, as ever – if not more so. Some years ago I was chatting to the then Minister Provincial of the Society of St Francis, that is of the Anglican Franciscan friars. I said that I’d not seen Brother Bert (the name is changed to protect the innocent!) I’d not seen Brother Bert for a while. Oh, my friar friend responded: ‘Bert’s left the order. He said he’d given ten good years of his life to the Franciscans and now he wanted to do something different.’ It is an interesting take on the religious life.

Interestingly enough, the Archbishop of Canterbury has chosen the ‘religious life’ as one of his three main focuses during his primacy and is setting up a ‘gap year’ community at Lambeth for the young, Last week’s *Church Times* included an advertisement for applications for the leader of the community to be paid £35,000 per year. The initiative is thoroughly good, but it’s interesting that to achieve real commitment, a carrot of £35,000 is necessary to entice someone to lead this new religious community.

Now it would be easy to see all this talk of commitment as focusing on some heartless and sterile discipline. But our third reading from Paul’s Letter to Philippians gives lie to any such misunderstanding. In a lyrical piece, Paul writes: ‘Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things.’

These qualities describe the life that God, in Jesus, lived. They are the qualities called out of us. Commitment is a dry word. The response of love is what is called out of us by God’s love in our creation and redemption. Amen.

Readings:

Exodus. 32. 1-14.

Philippians. 4. 1-9.

Matthew. 22. 1-14.