Sunday, February 8, 1976
THE FIRE AND THE CALF
Exodus 32:24

“So, they gave it to me; and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

In the story from which these words are taken, we see Moses go up into the mountain to hold communion with God. While he was gone the Israelites begin to murmur and complain. They want other gods, gods of their own. Aaron, the brother of Moses, was their priest. He yielded to the people, and when they brought him their golden earrings, he made out of them a golden calf for them to worship.

When Moses came down from the mountain, he found the people deep in their idolatry. He was indignant. First, he destroyed the idol, “He burnt it in the fire and ground it into powder, mixed it with water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.” Then he turned to Aaron: “What did these people do to you that you brought such a great sin upon them?” And Aaron answered, “Let not the anger of my Lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us...'And I said unto them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off;’ so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

That was his reply. The real story of what happened had been written earlier in the chapter. When the people brought Aaron their gold, he received it and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf. That was what really happened, but instead he said to Moses, “So they gave it to me; and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

Aaron was frightened at what he had done. He was afraid of the act itself, and of what Moses would say. Like all timid people, he trembled before the storm he had raised. And so, he tried to persuade Moses, and perhaps in some degree even to persuade himself, that it was not he that had done this thing. He lays the blame upon the furnace. “The fire did light,” he declares. He will not blankly face his sin, and yet he will not tell a lie in words. He tells what is literally true. He had cast the earrings into the fire, and this calf had come out. But he leaves out the one important point, his own personal agency in it all; the fact that he had molded the earrings into the calf’s shape and that he had taken it out and set it on its pedestal for the people to adore. He tells it so that it shall all look automatic. It is a curious, ingenious, but transparent lie.

Let us look at Aaron’s speech a little this morning and see what it represents. There never was a speech truer to our human nature. We are all ready to lay the blame on the furnaces. “The fire did it,” we are all of us ready to say.

Here is a man all gross and sensual, a man still young, who has lost the freshness and the glory and the purity of youth. He is profane; he is cruel; he is licentious; all his brightness had grown lurid; all his wit is ribaldry. You know the man. As far as a man can be, he is a brute. Suppose you question him about his life. You expect him to be ashamed, repentant. There is not a sign of anything like that! He says, “I am the victim of circumstances. What a corrupt, licentious profane age is this in which we live! When I was in college I got into a bad set. When I went into business I was surrounded by bad influences. When I grew rich, people flattered me. When I grew poor, people bullied me. The world has made me what I am; this fiery, passionate, wicked world. I had in my hands the gold of my boyhood which God gave me. Then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.”

So, the poor wronged miserable creature looks into your face with his bleared eyes and asks your pity. Another man is not a profligate, but a miser, or a mere business machine. “What can you ask of me?” he says. “This is a mercantile community. The businessman who does not attend to his business goes to the wall. I am what this intense commercial life has made me. I put my life in there, and it came out this.” And he gazes fondly at his golden calf and his knees bend under him with the old habit of worshipping it, and he loves it still, even while he abuses and disowns it.

And so, with the woman of society. “The fire made me this,” she says of her frivolity and pride. And so, of the politician and his selfishness and partisanship. “I put my principles into the furnace, and this came out.” And so, of the bigot and his bigotry, the one-sided conservative with his stubborn resistance to all progress, the one-sided radical with his ruthless iconoclasm. So, of all partial and fanatical people. “The furnace made us,” They are ready to declare. These things compel us to be this. In better times we might have been better, broader people; but now behold, God put us into the fire, and we came out this.

It is what one is perpetually hearing about disbelief. The times have made me skeptical. How is it possible for a person to live in days like these and yet believe in God and Jesus and the Resurrection? You ask me how I, who was brought up in the faith and in the church, became a disbeliever. Oh, you remember that I lived five years here, or three years there. You know I have been very much thrown with this set or with that. You know the emperor our town. I cast myself into the fire, and I came out this.

Remember that the subtlety and attractiveness of this excuse, this plausible attributing of power to inanimate things and exterior conditions to create what only man can make, extends not only to the results which we see coming forth in ourselves; it covers also the fortunes of those for whom we are responsible. The father says of his profligate son whom he has never done one wise or vigorous thing to make a noble and pure minded man: I cannot tell how it has come. It has not been my fault. I put him into the world, and this came out. “Everywhere there is this cowardly casting off of responsibilities upon the dead circumstances around us.”

This excuse of Aaron is heard everywhere and always. What happens is that we often just put ourselves into a current which is sweeping on that way, and then lie still and let the current do the rest; and in all such cases it is so easy to ignore or to forget the first step, which was that we chose that current for our resting place, and so to say that it is only the drift of the current which is to blame for the dreary shore on which at last our lives are cast up by the stream is false.

For there are always currents flowing in all bad directions. There is a perpetual river flowing towards sensuality and vice. There is a river flowing perpetually towards hypocrisy and religious pretense. There is a river always running towards skepticism and infidelity. And when you once have given yourself up to any of these rivers, then there is quite enough in the continual pressure, in that great movement li.ke a fate beneath your keel, to make you lose the sense and remembrance that it is by your own will that you are there, and only think of the resistless flow of the river which is always in your eyes and ears.

People differ, perhaps, nowhere else more than in their disposition to face the acts of their lives and to recognize their own personal part and responsibility for the things they do.

Look for instance at this Aaron and his brother Moses. The two men are characterized by their own sins. The sin of Aaron was a denial or concealment of his own personal agency: “I cast it into the fire and there came out this calf.” The sin of Moses, you remember, was just the op-posite. As he stood with his thirsty people in front of the rock of Horeb, he intruded his personal agency where it had no right. “Hear now, you rebels; must we fetch water out of this rock?” To be sure, in the case of Moses it was a good act of mercy to which he put his claim, while in Aaron’s case it was a wicked act whose responsibility he desired to avoid.

We are always ready to claim the good deeds in which we have the slightest share, even when we try to disown the sins which are entirely our own. Moses is the braver man. In Aaron the priest there is something of that oversubtle, artificial, complicated character, that power of being morally confused even in the midst of pious feeling, that lack of simplicity, and of the disposition to look things frankly in the eye; in a word, that vague and defective sense of personality and its responsibilities which has often in the history of religion made the very name of priestcraft a reproach. Moses is the prophet. His distinct mission is the utterance of truth. He is always simple; never simpler than when he is most profound; never surer of the fundamental principles of right and wrong, of honesty and truth, than when he is deepest in the mystery of God; never more conscious of himself and his responsi-bilities than when he is most conscious of God and his power.

But if the. world is thus full of the Aaron spirit, of the disposition to throw the blame of wrongdoing upon other things and other people, to represent to others and to our own souls, that our sins do themselves, what is the spiritual source of such a tendency, and where are we to look for its cure? I have just intimated what seems to me to be its source. It is a vague and defective sense of personality. We have forgotten that we are distinct individuals whom God has given the responsibility for making choices and decisions. Aaron did not have to make the golden calf. He chose to do so.

Now as to the cure. I cannot look for it anywhere short of that great assertion of the human personality which is made when a person enters into the power of Jesus Christ. Think of it! Here is some Aaron of our modern life trying to cover up some sin which he has done. The fact of the sin is clear enough. It stands out wholly undisputed. It is not by denying that the thing was done but by beclouding the fact that he did it with his own hands, with his own will; thus, it is that the person would cover up his sin. He has been nothing but an agent, nothing but a victim; so, he assures his fellow human beings, so he assures himself.

And now suppose that while he is doing that, the great change comes to that person by which he is made a disciple and servant of Jesus Christ. It becomes known to him as a certain fact that God loves him individually and is educating him with a separate personal education which is all his own. The clear individuality of Jesus stands distinctly out and says to him, “Follow me!” Jesus stops in front of where he is working just as evidently as he stopped in front of the booth where Matthew was sitting collecting taxes, and says, “Follow me.” He is called separately, and separately he does give himself to Christ. Remember all that is essential to a Christian faith. You cannot blur it all into indistinctness and generality. In the true light of the redeeming Incarnation, every person in the multitude stands out as every blade of grass on the hillside distinct from every other when the sun has risen. In this sense, as in many another, this is the true light which lightens every person that comes into the world.

The Bible calls it a new birth, and in that name too there are many meanings. And among other meanings in it must there not be this — the separateness and personality of every soul in Christ? Birth is the moment of distinctness. And so, when the possession of the soul by Christ

is called the “new birth,” one of the meanings of that name is this, that then there is a reassertion of personality, and the soul which. lost itself in the slavery of the multitude, finds itself again in the obedience of Christ.

And now what will be the attitude of this person, with his newly awakened selfhood, towards that sin which he has been telling himself that his hands did, but that he did not do? May he not almost say that he will need that sin for his self-identification? Who is he? A being whom Christ has forgiven, and then in virtue of that forgiveness made His servant. All his new life dates from and begins with his sin. He cannot afford to find his consciousness of himself only in the noble parts of his life, which it makes him proud and happy to remember. There is not enough of that to make for him a complete and continuous personality. It will have great gaps if he disowns the wicked demonstrations of his selfhood and says, “it was not I,” whenever he has done wrong. No! Out of his sin, out of the bad, base, cowardly acts which are truly his, out of the weak and wretched passages of his life which it makes him ashamed to remember, but which he forces himself to recollect and own, out of these he gathers the consciousness of a self all astray with self-will, which he then brings to Christ and offers in submission and obedience to his perfect will.

So, the only hope for any of us is in a perfectly honest ability to claim our sins, “I did it! I did it,” let me say of all my wickedness. Let me refuse to listen for one moment to any voice which would make my sins less mine. It is the only honest and the only hopeful way, the only way to know and be ourselves. When we have done that, then we are ready for the Gospel, ready for all that Christ wants to show us that we may become, and for all the powerful grace by which he wants to make us be it perfectly. Amen.