

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We have a very dear friend called Debbie who works for American Airlines and we're fortunate enough to be listed as her nearest, and dearest on her pass, which means that we can get tickets free, sometimes, if we only have to pay the taxes. The only thing is, you have to fly standby. I don't know if anyone here has flown standby. I, personally, find it extremely difficult. All the people who've bought tickets are there in the lounge with you. They all go through. Then, you're left looking nervously, at the other people. Are they above you or below you on the list? Then, you look up at the screen. You see how many seats there are available. You look around, see how many there are in the lounge left. Are you ever gonna get on? Are you not?

Laura is a different personality to me, my wife. She just sits there with a magazine, thinking, "Well, if I get on, I get on. If I don't, I don't." Meanwhile, I'm pacing up and down the lounge, looking daggers at anyone who comes anywhere near the gate, just trying to control them with my eyes, to get them to veer away to another place. I just can't stand it. I get all chewed up inside. I can't stand the not knowing. Am I gonna get on this flight? Am I not? Do I have to make alternative plans, or is everything gonna be okay?

There have been times, I've bought a ticket, rather than fly on the pass, because the whole experience is just too damaging for me. I can't bear not knowing. I'll pay to have the certainty of knowing that I'm going to get on the flight. Now I tell you this, as the old testament reading today is all about how the people of Israel, failed to do well with the uncertainty of not knowing.

The people of Israel, as we heard last week, have just been given the Ten Commandments. Moses has gone up the Mount Sinai to meet with God. He came back down with the Ten Commandments, taught the people, and in between our readings, he's gone back up again, and left the people at the bottom of the mountain, waiting for more instructions from God. The cloud of the Lord's presence covers the mountain, and the people are

waiting for Moses' return, to see what other messages God might have for them. That's where our reading begins.

The people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain and they said, "We do not know what has become of him." This was their equivalent of the departure lounge. They didn't know what was happening next. They were waiting, and they didn't know how long they'd have to wait. As we all know, waiting is much worse, if we don't have a time limit, if we don't have an end point.

Maybe they thought, "Moses has died," in which case they'd be waiting there forever. The people of Israel are wrestling with the uncertainty of not knowing. They turned to Aaron, Moses brother, who doesn't come out too well from this story. In their desperation, they say to Aaron, "Help us out. Bring some clarity to this situation. Make Gods for us." Now, Aaron could have shown some leadership, or backbone, and said, "No. We're going to wait here, and trust that God will speak to us again, and Moses will return." That isn't what he said, as you know. He said, "Give me your gold." He makes a calf.

Now I've preached many sermons on this passage before. It's a great passage to preach from, very evocative. I think that over the years I've been misleading my hearers because I've always interpreted this passage about the danger of replacing worship of the one true God, with the worship of idols. I've spent my time pontificating about what kind of idols we might have in our life, to replace the worship of the one true God.

I've looked at the story more closely this week. I don't think actually that's what the people of Israel did, in this story. Aaron took their gold, melted it down, made a calf, but look at what they said about the golden calf. They don't say, "Forget Moses' God, Yahweh, the God who brought us out of Egypt." They say, "There are your Gods O' Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

They didn't think they were worshiping a different God to Yahweh. Just Yahweh in a form they could see, and touch, and control. They needed

something to cling onto, in the midst of their uncertainty. They needed something to be sure about. That was the function of the golden calf. I don't think that the people's problem here is idolatry. It's the problem of dealing with uncertainty. There was no sign of Moses, no word from God, and they couldn't live with that. They responded by making a calf. They reduced God to a form they could manipulate. They couldn't wait. They needed certainty. We can all relate to that.

We live so much time in midst of uncertainty. Will this operation work? How long have I got? Does she love me? Will I get that job? When's the next earthquake going to be? That's a big one for me. There's so much to worry about, so much uncertainty, so many unanswered questions. Then you bring children into the equation. What school will they go to? Will they get into a good college? How will we pay for that college? Will they like me?

It was uncertainty, gnawing at the Israelites. Moses had gone away, and we don't know how long he's going to be. He might never come back. We're stuck out here in the wilderness. What's going to become of us? And as I say, the Israelites response to these questions was less than ideal.

What can we learn from them? How do we avoid their mistake? What are the alternatives to building the equivalent of a calf? How might we respond better to the uncertainty that's part of all of our lives? Well, we could embrace the uncertainty, and remember that we're Episcopalians. We're meant to be good at mystery. We're not a tradition that claims to have all the answers. We're happier than most with a level of uncertainty, and a lack of clarity. Episcopalians are generally happy with a range of answers to life's questions, rather than one definitive one. Now, of course, to those outside this can sometimes look wishy washy. There is a strength in resisting the desire to constrain God, by pinning down precisely what can be said about him.

I was on the island of Lindisfarne once on retreat. It's a beautiful island. Sometimes called Holy Island, off the north coast of England. I went out for a walk the first night I got there, and the people I was

staying with said, "Watch out for the quicksand." As I was walking along, I thought, "How do you warn people about quicksand?" You can't put sign saying, "Danger. Quicksand," in the middle of the quicksand, or you and the sign would presumably disappear. The best you can do to warn people of quicksand is presumably to put signs around where the quicksand isn't, to say, "Look out. There's quicksand near here."

There's something in that, in our talk about God. We can't pin God down. We can't say, "We've got the truth," and put our flag in God. We could just point pointers around the outside saying, "Well, God is here somewhere. Can't exactly describe him, but we know God is here." There's always going to be a certain vagueness in our talk about God. That's inevitable. And there's always a temptation to reduce the God, who is beyond all understanding, to an idol, to something we can control, and manipulate, to say, "We've got it, and you haven't."

Instead, let's remind ourselves that we worship a God who is untamed, mysterious, and full of surprises, a God who will not be tied to small and humanly constructed images, language, traditions, or ideologies. I hope that our worship catches something of that mystery. If it sometimes feels strange, that's because we are worshiping a God who is other.

I also want to say that living with uncertainty, being comfortable with leaving some things unanswered, does not mean that there are no answers. We embrace the element of certainty, whilst being sure of what we do know. As I reflect on my own spiritual journey, I can see that I'm less sure about a bigger number of things, but more sure about a smaller number of things.

For instance, I'm convinced of the importance of the need to understand God, in personal terms. God is not to be regarded as an impersonal force. Such a God might be easier to believe in, but that's not the God of the Bible. I'm constantly meeting people who say, "Oh, I'm religious. I believe in God, but I don't go to church." Part of what they mean, I think, is that I want my God to be removed, and impersonal, a God who doesn't make too many

demands. The Bible introduces us to a different God, a God who can be named, as the father of Jesus Christ, a God who Moses discovered, could be known, a God in personal terms. That's what we've seen throughout the Moses story, a God who is named, a God who Moses spoke to, a God who could be known.

It's right to talk in terms like, knowing God, nurturing a relationship with God. Language which might seem odd to modern ears. That's the language which the Bible calls us to. Belief is complicated by such personal talk. We look at the passage from Exodus. The whole context is one of God revealing himself to Moses, of Moses being invited to be in relationship with God, as evidenced by this strange conversation that ends our reading where Moses persuades God to turn his anger away from the people. This, to me, is getting close to the unique heart of our Christian faith.

We, as Christians worship a personal, living God, a God who can be known, just as Moses knew God. That's why we can talk of things like trusting God. We're called to respond to the God, who makes himself known to us, by trusting him, by committing ourselves to him. Our uncertainty is overcome with trust. We know that to be true on a human level that relationships can cope with a very high degree of uncertainty.

I made a commitment to my wife Laura, when I married her, few years ago. There are still lots of things I don't know about her, more that I don't understand about her. I hope to spend decades exploring that, getting to know more and more. And so it is with God, we can begin to get to know God, without ever knowing everything. The contrast is drawn in this passage between Moses, who spent time getting to know God on the mountain, and the Israelites, who didn't fancy the uncertainty of such a relationship. They went for the quick fix of idolatry. The golden calf brought them comfort, and security, but not the joy, and the intimacy that Moses knew.

And as we come now in our service to Williams Baptism ... Oh, he's still here. Good. That's good. Our prayer for William today, is that he will grow

up to know and trust the God who made him, that he'll have the joy of coming into that living relationship with God, who is the father of Jesus Christ. What we pray for William, may that be true to, for ourselves.

Amen.