**The Ark of God among the Philistines**  6/3/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 5, Acts 19:1-20

Text: 1Samuel 5

Psalms: 34:1-9, 115:1-9, 50:7-13, 72old

On 21st September 1995 I was riding my motor bike into the city of Allahabad but had to turn back because of a crowd blocking the street. People were flocking to a temple which housed the elephant god, Ganesh. I later heard that a rumour was spreading like wildfire from city to city across the country. It was reported that the Ganesh idol was drinking milk offered to it. Thousands upon thousands were rushing to offer milk to this idol. It is reported that milk sales in Delhi jumped 30% in a day.

I recall that the government asked for this phenomenon, this apparent miracle, to be investigated. Top scientists did so, and concluded that it was simply a matter of surface tension drawing milk from teaspoons, which evaporated as it ran down the, often white marble, idol; idols made of other materials were not obliging worshippers! For me it was astounding that so many people, even highly educated people, actually believed this lump of stone was drinking milk.

It was some years before this time that a Hindu lady heard the gospel and believed in Jesus as her saviour and Lord. Her Ganesh idol was not drinking milk because she had thrown it out of her house, along with all other idols of the different gods she once worshipped.

In Israel at the time Samuel was born, people were going through the motions of worship but living to please themselves. The priests were breaking one commandment after another. But God, who had not spoken for a long time, spoke through a man of God, and through Samuel, declaring that he was going to kill the two wicked priests. When the Ark of the Covenant was carried to the battle field as a good-luck charm, the priests were with it, and were killed by the Philistines.

The Philistines captured the ark, rejoicing that their gods defeated the God of Israel symbolised in the Ark of the Covenant. They were initially fearful of the ark, while the Israelites initially rejoiced in having the ark of God in their camp. There was little difference in thinking between the pagan Philistines and the people of God with regard to their god or gods. But when the ark was captured the tables were turned. The Israelites were distraught; old Eli fell off his chair and died. The Philistines on the other hand, went home thinking their gods were more powerful than Yahweh.

Chapter 5 tells us what happened when they put the ark of God in the temple of Dagon. The story is dramatic and somewhat amusing to us today, but the events that followed were deadly serious for the Philistines. The hand of the Lord was heavy upon those who took custody of the ark of God. Our subheadings are simply, ‘Hands of Dagon broken’ and, ‘Heavy hand of the Lord’.

**1. Hands of Dagon broken**

Having defeated the Israelites and captured their God, the Philistines took the ark of God back to their city, Ashdod. This was the northernmost of the five Philistine cities and the city closest to the battle site at Aphek. They put this golden box, 1.1 x 0.7 x 0.7m in size beside the huge idol of Dagon in their temple. Dagon seems to have been made in the form of a man. The word ‘Dagon’ means ‘grain’; it is thought that this was a fertility god related to Baal. The Philistines probably adopted this god when they settled in Canaan. The ark of God was set in a humbling position before the mighty and victorious god, Dagon.

When the people of Ashdod went to worship their god early the next morning, they found Dagon flat on his face before the ark of God (5:4). Their god had taken a tumble and needed help to get back on his feet, so the people gave Dagon a helping hand! We are reminded of the words of Isaiah 44 about men cutting down a tree and using one half to make a carved image or idol and burning the other half in the fire. Idols were also made of gold and silver, but the idol of Dagon was probably made of clay and richly decorated.

Isaiah’s mockery extends to pointing out that these idols need to be carried about. The Hebrews carried the ark of course, but as this story shows us, God is well able to look after himself. He is all-sufficient and sovereign; he does not ‘need’ us, despite what some Christians and their hymns teach. God wants us to worship and obey him, and he calls us to serve him, but ‘he owns the cattle on a thousand hills’ (Ps 50:10), and as we see from this story, he is able to defend and exalt himself without our help.

The Philistines set their god back on its feet bedside the ark of God. But when they came to worship the next morning, Dagon had again fallen on his face before the ark of the Lord. He had fallen across the threshold of the temple and was now without a head or hands- not a glorious site. His head was no use anyway because, as the Psalmist says, he could not see, hear, or speak anyway, let alone give counsel (Ps 115). Moreover, the hands that man gave this idol were also useless; Dagon could not even get himself back on his feet!

We are not told of the Philistines setting Dagon back on his feet a second time; most probably they left their idol lying there because they now regarded the threshold on which it fell as somehow holy (cf. Zeph 1:9). Pagans are not averse to bowing down to relics they have found. Sadly the pope and his priests do the same. Calvin once mocked the pope saying that he could make a number of crosses from all the bits of wood they venerated as being from the actual cross of Christ.

**2. Heavy hand of the Lord**

‘The hand of the Lord was heavy upon the people of Ashdod’ and its surrounds (5:6). Not only was the God of Israel causing havoc in the temple, he was bringing disaster to the people, striking their bodies with painful and deadly tumours. Because the Septuagint mentions rats springing up, and because the Philistines later made gold rats by way of a guilt offering, it is thought this disaster was bubonic plague, or ‘black death’, as it was known in seventeenth century England.

The narrator tells us that the heavy hand of the Lord was behind this epidemic in Ashdod and surrounds (5:6). Moreover, the people themselves recognised the heavy hand of the Lord behind the epidemic of tumours decimating their community (5:7). How did they come to this recognition? They had no Scriptures, no word of God to turn to. They had no prophets of the Lord to consult. Why did they not conclude that it was just a coincidence that their idol kept falling down, and that deadly tumours broke out on their bodies?

What would happen if a deadly disease broke out and started killing people in our community? Would anyone conclude that God’s hand was heavy upon us? Would anyone start thinking like the Philistines, thinking of some way to get God to lift his heavy hand and maybe even make atonement with this God? We are jumping ahead, but as we said before, we believe in the supernatural while not being superstitious. Many believe in a supreme being but fail to see him as a living being, as the powerful creator and ruler of this world and all its nations.

In Hebrew the word for ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty’ is ‘*kabed*’. Objects can be heavy but so can actions and even words. I find reading legal documents ‘heavy going’. Moreover, we refer to people high up and powerful in an organisation as being the ‘heavies’ of the organisation. There is a related word in Hebrew, the word *‘kabod*’, which means ‘glory’. Glory has the sense of being ‘weighty or ‘heavy’. Recall that the glory of God had departed from Israel with the loss of the ark (4:21). That glory or ‘*kabod*’ has returned to the ark of God with his heavy, ‘*kabed*’, hand now being felt by the Philistines.

God’s glory is a very heavy and profound reality. We do not see Him in all his glory today but we will one day. We do however see a reflection of his glory when his heavy hand is revealed. Wise people will recognise the heavy hand of the Lord upon them and do something to remove it.

The people of Ashdod concluded, ‘the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us’ (5:7). They called an urgent meeting of all five Philistine leaders to express their concerns: ‘What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel’ (5:8). The decision was made to carry the ark to the nearby city of Gath, about 20kms inland from Ashdod. If nothing happened to the people of Gath then the ark of God was not to blame for the disasters in Ashdod. However, their fears were realised and, ‘The hand of the Lord was against the city [of Gath] with a very great destruction’ (5:9). Bubonic plague broke out in Gath and surrounds. Wisely, the elders of Gath acted quickly to send the ark to the next nearest Philistine city, that of Ekron, about 10kms to the north.

As the ark of God was carried into their city the people of Ekron cried out, ‘Why are you bringing that ‘god’ into our city to kill us?’ The God of Israel whom they had defeated on the battlefield was not acting like a defeated God. The Philistines were rapidly reviewing their theology. This God that they had captured was toppling their gods and afflicting their people with sickness. This god was breaking all their rules; he was not doing what people said. Moreover, it was difficult to ignore this god. They could have pressed on, watching people die all around them, but they realised how the disease and the death were linked to the symbolic presence of the God of Israel, and to the heavy hand of God upon them (5:11).

The Philistines called another national summit. As a nation we did the same thing when a viral pandemic hit our nation; we formed a national cabinet. The Philistine leaders came to the decision that the ark of the God of Israel must be returned to where it belonged, ‘so that it does not kill us and our people’ (5:11).

This was wise thinking on the part of these pagans. Even wiser thinking would have been to abandon Dagon, and all their other gods, and start worshipping the God of Israel because he was clearly the more powerful God. But instead of calling for a Hebrew priest to tell them how to worship the all-powerful God of Israel, they decided to send the ark of God back. Needless to say, it would have been difficult in those days to find a priest in Israel who knew how to worship God.

Sadly, I did not hear of our national cabinet acknowledging God in any way during our pandemic. We ourselves continued crying out to the Lord for him to lift his heavy hand from upon us, and to bring revival in our midst. But we also ask how many in the church today are able to tell a pagan population the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how to worship the true and living God. Are you able and ready to do this?