**Send the ark back!**  20/3/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 6, Romans 1:16-32

Text: 1Samuel 6:1-12

Psalms: 30:1-8, 144:9-15, 323:7-11, 117

When a Hindu lady believed in Jesus Christ as her saviour and Lord, she threw all idols out of her home. Most Hindus have a place in their home for ‘puja’ or worship; they have an idol of their favourite god on a shelf with a candle or light in front. They will garland this idol when they worship. This is why I hate seeing garlanded pictures in Christian homes. By all means, remember those who have died, but do not worship them!

One day this converted lady came to me one with some ‘holy beads’ that were given to her by a Hindu holy man during a huge Hindu festival. He was selling such beads but gave these to this Christian lady. Christian friends were as disturbed as she was at seeing these ‘holy beads’. What was to be done with them? I knew I had to get rid of them, so flushed them down the toilet! Nothing bad happened to me of course, because such gods are nothing (1Cor 8:4). But the ark of God was a symbol of the true and living God, the God ‘of whom are all things and through whom are all things’ (1Cor 8:6). Its holiness was real, not imagined.

The story of ‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who dwells between the cherubim’ (4:4), began in chapter 4 with the Hebrews taking the ark from the house of God at Shiloh to the battlefield- like some good-luck charm! To their surprise and dismay, the Philistines beat them and captured the ark. This battle trophy proved to be deadly, destroying their god Dagon and bringing a terrible disease upon the people. They proved this by moving the ark from city to city and observing the outcome. ‘The ark brought deadly destruction… because the hand of God was very heavy there’ (5:11).

At a national cabinet it was decided to send the ark of God back to where it came from as a matter of urgency; people were dying and cries were going up to heaven (5:12). But how was the ark to be sent back. This God was angry with them already; they dared not make him angrier. If thousands perished for merely looking into the ark (6:19), imagine what would have happened if anyone tried to smash it to pieces.

The ark had been in the land seven months before the Philistines decided to send it back to Israel (6:1). They called a meeting of experts, which in those days meant religious leaders rather than scientists and politicians, as we do today. The advice of these religious leaders, priests and diviners, proved to be wise- unlike that of our experts most of the time. Science experts in Germany closed down all coal-fired power stations to become dependent on Russian gas, and look at their predicament today!

We will look at the advice of the Philistine priests and diviners under four subheadings: make a sin offering, make a new cart, milking cows, and movement of the cart monitored.

**1. Make a sin offering**

Gods get upset when they are offended, just as people do. Pagans know this, which is why they appease their gods with offerings. If something bad happens it is because you have offended a god, so you must appease this god- it is not always easy to know the particular god you have offended! Since the God of Israel, symbolized in the ark of God, was angry with them, as evidenced by the deadly epidemic, they had to appease God is some way. This was the first piece of advice given by the priests. The ark must not be sent away empty, they said, but must be returned with a sin or trespass or guilt offering (6:3). Only in this way could the Lord’s heavy hand of judgment be removed from them.

There is no indication of a priest from Israel being among these religious advisors, but the God of Israel had ordained that his people confess their sin and bring an offering to the house of God; this was to be a female goat or lamb (Lev 5:6). When the Philistines asked what they should bring as a trespass offering, the religious leaders told them to make and bring five gold tumours and five gold rats (6:4). ‘Five’ because there were five lords of the Philistines, and gold because no expense was to be spared in making this offering. But tumours and rats! They saw that rats were ravaging the land (6:5) and must have linked their presence to the tumours breaking out on the people. But they were not so blind as to simply advise getting rid of the rats because the rats only came when the ark of God came. Pagans today seem ‘blinder’ than they were in the days of Samuel.

Not knowing the requirement for atonement to be blood sacrifices for sin, the Philistine advisors suggested that the guilt offering should reflect their sin in some way. Confession of sin means turning away from sin and making restitution as appropriate. If you have stolen something you must return it. The Philistines were returning the ark of God that they had taken, and seeking to appease God for doing so with these costly images of the afflictions they had suffered at the hand of God (6:5). So it was that five gold tumours and five gold rats were made and put into a chest beside the ark of God. Along with these they were to give glory to the God of Israel (6:5).

The Philistines, or their religious leaders at least, were not entirely ignorant of the ways of the God of Israel, as their proposal to make a sin offering shows. They had learnt from history of the great battle between Pharaoh and Moses down in Egypt. They warned the Philistines against going down the same path, the path of hardening one’s heart in defiance of Yahweh, the God of Israel (6:6).

The plague that was striking the Philistines reminded them of the plagues with which Yahweh struck the Egyptians. The whole world knew the story of the Exodus, and wise men did not want to see it repeated. The proverb, ‘history forgotten is history repeated’ is true. We could add that merely rewriting history is not going to stop it being repeated. The Egyptians were probably taught a different history of the Exodus to that written in the Bible, but wisely, the Philistines listened to historical truth rather than lies.

**2. Make a new cart**

‘Now therefore make a new cart’- so the advice of the religious leaders continued (6:7). ‘A new cart’ we might say, ‘Why not an old cart?’ This cart, it was hoped, would carry the troublesome god back to where it belonged. This cart would never be seen again, so why not send an old one? These pagans new better than many Christians today who think that God should be pleased with the left-overs of their life, including their time. A new cart means bringing the first fruits of our income and our time.

In this matter, the Israelites also have something to teach us. When the new cart reached Israel, the people of the town split the wood of the cart and offered the prize cows as a burnt offering to the Lord (6:14). Nothing was too good or too costly to be offered to the Lord!

**3. Milking cows**

These pagan priests came up with an amazing final test to see if the ark of God was the indisputable cause of their troubles. You will be aware of Gideon and the way he tested the Lord with a fleece (Judg 6:36-40). God was merciful, and also sufficient, for Gideon’s test- Gideon was wary of making God angry. The Philistines had concluded that God was angry with them but wanted conclusive proof. The test they were setting was a natural impossibility- but with God all things are possible!

The new cart with the ark of God set upon it and the gold tumours and rats in a chest beside it (6:8), needed two animals to pull it. Normally oxen would be used. If oxen were yoked to the cart and set on their way they might go anywhere, even towards Israel. These wise men decided to use milking cows, cows that had calved only recently. I can still hear from my childhood, the mooing or lowing of cows separated from their calves- they could go on all day! I also remember walking the paddocks going ‘baa, baa’ like a calf trying to get a cow to lead me to her calf. Our text does not tell of the calves crying out for their mothers, but it does tell of the cows ‘lowing as they went’ (6:12).

The Philistines did as their religious leaders advised and yoked two milking cows to the new cart on which the ark of God had been placed. With the calves locked in a pen, they sent the cows off. No one was leading them, so how would they know to head for the land of Israel. Besides, with their calves locked up it was most unlikely they would go anywhere. The Philistines sat down to see what happened.

**4. Movement of the cart monitored**

The advisors simply said, ‘And watch’, which is what they did (6:9). The test was that if the cows took the cart towards the closest Israelite town of Beth Shemesh they would know for sure that Yahweh had brought the great disaster upon them; if the cows did not take the cart away then the disaster was pure chance.

Most people today opt for the ‘pure chance’ explanation, being unwilling to put God to the test. The apostle Paul actually says, ‘Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were they thankful, but became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened’ (Rom 1:21). I truly hope these words do not apply to you! Not even the Philistines were so foolish.

What did the watchers see? ‘The cows headed straight for the road towards Beth Shemesh… lowing as they went’ (6:12). They were acting against all natural instincts. This was a miracle of animal behaviour. That the cows ‘did not turn aside to the right or the left’ adds to the miracle because the cows were milk cows that had never been yoked (6:7). Both cows were under divine compulsion to pull the cart towards Israelite territory.

I don’t know how sceptics and liberals try to explain away this miracle, but as always, Scripture has an answer for every argument brought by sceptics. The lords of the Philistines were themselves sceptical of this test set by their religious leaders. The closing words of this story confirm that it was indeed a miracle. ‘The lords of the Philistines went after them [the cows] to the border of Beth Shemesh’ (6:12). The people watched as the cows set off on the road to Beth Shemesh, but the lords or rulers wanted to be convinced beyond all reasonable doubt. So they followed the cows and the cart carrying the ark of Yahweh all the way to the border. They watched and said ‘good riddance’ to this ‘idol’ they had taken from Israel some seven months before.

To the Philistines knowledge of Yahweh’s dealing with Pharaoh and the Egyptians was added this personal experience of the heavy hand of God. Thankfully, they listened to their religious leaders and sent Yahweh out of their land before he totally destroyed them. But they were not ‘converted’ as we might say. They learnt that Yahweh is the most powerful God of all but, like the people referred to by the apostle Paul, although they knew God to be sovereign Lord of all they refused to accept him as their God. They went back it seems, to their superstitious ways, being careful not to tread on the threshold of the temple of Dagon.