

“Idol Pursuits”
Jeremiah 2:13; Romans 1:20 – 22

Let’s turn to Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 13.

By way of context, God’s spokesman Jeremiah has been called to speak out against Israel for its many sins. And there are two sins in particular that are the source of all the others. Let’s read:

“My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me, the spring of living water,
And have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

So water.

Our bodies are 60 percent water.

We can survive for around 20 to 40 days without food but only 3 without water.

71 percent of our planet is covered by water, and of that 71 percent, only 3.5 percent of it is drinkable. The rest is salt water.

So it’s not surprising that water was a luxury in the ancient Middle East and Mediterranean.

A spring with its constant provision of fresh water was cherished, especially in a time of drought.

Of course springs were relatively rare.

The other then option was cisterns.

Cisterns were these massive containers dug into the earth that were expected to hold and provide rainwater in the dry times.

Cisterns though were poor substitutes for a natural spring.

At best the water that they yielded was often stagnant.

At worst they developed cracks that allowed water to seep away.

So we have this picture this morning:

As the spring of living water, real life comes from God alone.

As human beings, God is the source of lasting meaning, lasting fulfillment, lasting purpose.

We have a thirst in our souls that only God can meet.
At least that is the way things are meant to be.

In Jeremiah we see that the issue wasn't only that God's people had abandoned Him – the source of real life (that was terrible enough) – but that also they “dug their own cisterns.”

In not pursuing God they ended up creating “God substitutes.”

They were trying to create their own source of life.

Jeremiah and the other Biblical authors consistently present this same theme; we either have a life centered on the Living God or we pursue idols. The “spring of “living water” or our “own cisterns.”

Which means every one of us is trying to find meaning and satisfaction in someone or something.

We are either pursuing the God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus or something or someone else.

The roots of this are found in our origins.

If we go back to Genesis chapter 3 verse 1:

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden.’?”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman.

“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

She also gave it to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then their eyes were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”

Here is the first attempt by human beings to find life and fulfillment and meaning outside of relationship with God.

The serpent is well aware that real life comes from God alone.

So he comes with this offer – this outright *lie* – that’s there’s more to be had in life apart from God.

Although there’s a mystery here, when Adam and Eve believed and acted on the serpents words they substituted God for what they thought could be gained from the fruit in the middle of the garden.

And ever since, humans have been pursuing idols instead of finding life in the true God.

In one sense the story of Genesis still happens every day.

Paul in Romans chapter 1 verse 20 sums things up well; if you don’t pursue the real God you end up with something else. He writes:

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools [“fools” doesn’t simply mean stupid – although it is that – it also means “morally corrupt] and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God **for** images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles.”

But before we are quick to pat ourselves on the back for the way in which we don’t worship idols, remember this: idols are not just made of wood and stone.

An idol is anything that has so captured our allegiance – our loyalty, our trust, the centre of our lives – that we begin to compromise some of our Lord’s commands.

In other words, instead of the Lord calling the shots in our lives, something or someone else does.

Let’s get a bit more concrete; what do these idols look like for the average Kiwi today, including those who follow Jesus?

Creating Jesus according to our personal preference.

Before we look outward, let's look inward.
Let's talk specifically about those of us who call ourselves Christians.

There is a professor of religious studies, whose name is Scot.
Every semester on the first day of his Jesus of Nazareth class he gives his students a test.

The test has a simple premise: with a series of questions he asks the students what they think Jesus is like.

Is he moody?

Does he get nervous?

Is he the life of the party or an introvert?

Is he easily angered?

Is he a goal focused or a relationship centered individual?

So there are 24 questions which are then followed by a second set – with slightly altered language – in which the students answer questions about their own personalities.

Scot is not the only one who has administered this exam. It has been field tested by other professionals as well.

But can you guess what they discovered?

Well the results are remarkably consistent – everyone thinks Jesus is just like them.

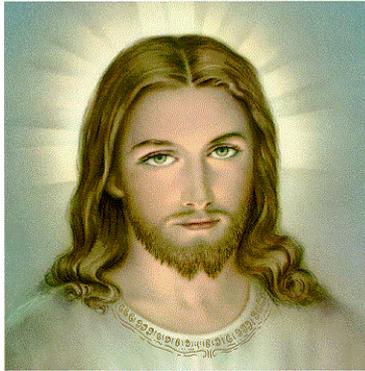
Scot added, “The test results also suggest that, even though we like to think we are becoming more like Jesus, the reverse is probably more the case – we try to make Jesus like ourselves.”¹

We should fear the danger of trying to mould or shape God as if he were made of plasticine.

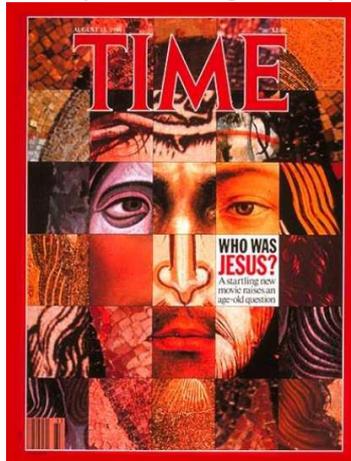
The danger is that Jesus is shaped by our likes and dislikes rather than our lives being shaped by Him.

I mean for example, Jesus the Anglo-Saxon, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, man, with no wrinkles and delicate features.

¹ Skye Jethani, *With – Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 61.



Time magazine had montage of Jesus' face as its cover, highlighting the way Jesus has been portrayed through the years:



So all this begs the question:

“In what ways might Christians make Jesus in their own image?”
Have a chat with those around you and then we'll have some feedback.

- ***By avoiding the hard sayings of Jesus.***
 - Hard sayings about family life.
 - Hard sayings about wealth.
 - Hard sayings about eternal destiny.
- ***Identifying Jesus with our own culture.***

e.g. Jesus affirms the cultural norms of society.
e.g. Philip Yancey's experience growing up in a racist church.
e.g. Jesus the prophet of social justice.

That is one path down the road of idolatry.
Another is more prevalent.

Author Timothy Keller writes that in the Western world idolatry is about the "making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship with God."²

The good things of life become the 'best' things and that's where the danger lies.
The gifts of God become rivals to God.

We've talked about this before so give me some.

In the end our idols, our "god-substitutes", will fail us.
They aren't life-giving springs.
They will be for us "broken cisterns that cannot hold water" leaving us stagnant dregs.

Bob Odenkirk, an actor who has won multiple awards, who's not a Christian as far as I'm aware, he had this insight:

"That's the wonderful lesson of success.
If you're lucky enough to have success in your career, in your life, a degree of success that you dreamed about or maybe even better than you dreamed about, then you're left looking and going, 'Oh, wait a second, I'm still unsatisfied. I'm still not okay with myself.' Then that makes you go, 'I always thought success was gonna give me that,' and of course, it isn't."³

At that moment when we want our idols to come through for us, to meet those deepest needs, they will let us down. What happens then?

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 162.

³ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/life-after-near-death-bob-odenkirk-on-better-call-saul-his-heart-attack-and-making-changes/4VWR7AAMO6OM7KS5UDECHE3GGQ/>

One episode of the old “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” TV show was about a pretty woman serving a life sentence in prison.

Angry and resentful about her situation, she had decided that she would rather die than to live another year incarcerated.

Over the years she had become good friends with one of the prison caretakers. His job, among others, was to bury those prisoners who died in a graveyard just outside the prison walls. When a prisoner died, the caretaker rang a bell, which was heard by everyone. The caretaker then got the body and put it in a casket. Next, he entered his office to fill out the death certificate before returning to the casket to nail the lid shut. Finally, he put the casket on a wagon to take it to the graveyard and bury it.

Knowing this routine, the woman devised an escape plan and shared it with the caretaker.

The next time the bell rang, the woman would leave her cell and sneak into the dark room where the coffins were kept. She would slip into the coffin with the dead body while the caretaker was filling out the death certificate. When the caretaker returned, he would nail the lid shut and take the coffin outside the prison with the woman in the coffin along with the dead body. He would then bury the coffin.

The woman knew that there would be enough air for her to breathe until later in the evening when the caretaker would return to the graveyard under the cover of darkness, dig up the coffin, open it, and set her free.

The caretaker was reluctant to go along with this plan, but since he and the woman had become good mates over the years, he agreed to do it. The woman waited several weeks before someone in the prison died.

She was asleep in her cell when she heard the death bell ring. She got up, picked the lock to her cell, and nervously walked down the hallway, narrowly avoiding detection. With her heart thumping in her chest, she finally opened the door to the darkened room where the coffins were kept. Quietly in the almost pitch-black darkness, she found the coffin that contained the dead body, carefully climbed in, and pulled the lid closed to wait for the caretaker to come and nail the lid shut.

Soon she heard footsteps and the pounding of the hammer and nails. Even though she was very uncomfortable in the coffin with the dead

body, she knew that with each nail she was one step closer to freedom. The coffin was lifted onto the wagon and taken outside to the graveyard. She could feel herself being lowered into the ground and didn't make a sound as the coffin hit the bottom of the grave with a thud.

Finally she heard the dirt dropping onto the top of the wooden coffin, and she knew that it was only a matter of time until she would be free at last.

After several minutes of absolute silence, she began to laugh. She was free! She was free!

Feeling curious, she decided to light a match to find out the identity of the dead prisoner beside her. To her horror she discovered that there, lying next to her was the dead caretaker.

The story is obviously fictional but the point is this; be careful who you trust in to save you.

Dead gods can't give life.

Apart from God, what we put our hope in will fail us in the end.

As I was preparing this I was asking God, why this message, and why now?

I mean, we've just had Easter where rejoiced in the pardon and reconciliation Jesus has won for us on the Cross and his triumph over sin and death in his resurrection.

So why *this* message?

Well I think it's this: in this time that we're in and we've been through, with its internal anxieties and external stresses and strained relationships, the serpent still whispers his lies— "Do you really think Jesus is enough to quench your deepest thirst and greatest longings of your heart? Surely it's found elsewhere."

There's a saying isn't there that goes, "It's been a long time between drinks".

And Jesus said, "*I* am the bread of life. He who comes to *me* will never go hungry, and he who believes in *me* will never be thirsty."

Let's pray.