

Homily based on the readings from July 31, 2023 (Exodus 32.15-24, 30-34; Matthew 13.31-35)

Most of us, I imagine, are fairly familiar with the story of the golden calf. Like many episodes from the first two books of the Old Testament, it possesses a vividness that makes it stick in our imagination. Every time I hear this reading, I still think about a particular illustration from my childhood book of Bible stories.

Despite its familiarity, this incident raises several uncomfortable questions. The first, and probably the most obvious, is how could the Children of Israel – God’s chosen people – possibly have demanded to worship a gaudy, lifeless figurine in place of the one true, living God? To be sure, it seems unlikely that anyone today would request that particular substitution. Nevertheless, the world around us is full of even more ridiculous replacements for God. How many people do we know who have made politics, sports, music, their careers, their personal comfort, or even their diet the defining feature of their lives? From an

objective point of view, those choices are just as foolhardy as worshipping a melted-down mound of jewelry. It is particularly mind-boggling that anyone who has been given the incomparable gift of the Holy Eucharist could choose to walk away from it *voluntarily*.

A more uncomfortable question is what in the world was Aaron, the High Priest of Israel, doing? How did he not know better? How did he get away with blaming the people under his care for his own misdeeds?

Remember what Aaron said to Moses:

You know well enough how prone the people are to evil.

They said to me, “Make us a god to be our leader ...

So I told them, “Let anyone who has gold jewelry take it off.’

They gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and this calf came out.”

*This calf came out.* Aaron would not even admit to making it with his own hands. Not since Adam blamed Eve for eating the apple was there such a clear case of someone not taking responsibility for his own

failings. Not until Simon Peter denied Christ three times would there be a more egregious example of a religious leader turning his back on his ministry, his people, and his God.

I have no explanation for why Aaron seems not to have been punished by God for this horrific failure – although it is worth noting that the Lord did not allow him to “enter the land which [he had] given to the people of Israel.” The only sense I can make of this situation is that Aaron’s ministry did not come from his own virtue, his own goodness, or his own holiness – but from God’s choice to consecrate him as High Priest. In a similar way, the power of the Church’s ministry today is not derived from the prudence of our pastors or the dedication of our deacons. As the Catechism reminds us:

The Church does not possess [any of her defining characteristics] of herself; it is Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, makes his Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and it is he who calls her to realize each of these qualities. (811)

The sacraments, in particular, do not depend – even to the slightest degree – on the worthiness of the minister, but are simply the outpouring of God’s grace. The holy priests we have are a great blessing to the faithful, but the greatest gifts – the only ones that truly matter – come directly from Christ himself.