

Minister's Message – July 2008

Carved Images

Walking through any town in North India you will soon come across a shrine by the roadside or in front of a temple. An idol resembling some animal or person will be housed in this brightly lit shrine. The idols will vary for there are thousands of deities – one for every need in life. There are deities for safety in travel, for learning, for healing, for prosperity and so on. You will see people bowing to this image as they pass by, or stopping to light a candle or burn some incense. Most people in this town will be Hindus.

Walking through a town in South India you will come across shrines by the roadside or in front of churches. Inside the shrine will be an idol of a man, woman, or a woman and a baby. As people pass this brightly lit shrine they bow and cross themselves. Some will stop to light a candle and pray. Some shrines will be of saints to whom the people pray. There are thousands of saints, one for every need in life. Most people in this town will be Roman Catholics.

To the casual observer these towns do not appear very different. The idols in their shrines look different but that is about all. This is remarkable for religions that claim to be markedly different. It is most remarkable that people calling themselves Christians have idols at all when in the book they claim to be following it is clearly written that God said *You shall not make for yourselves a carved image, the likeness of anything that is in heaven or on earth...you shall not bow down to them nor serve them* (Deuteronomy 5:8). There is no exception here for images of Mary, or even of Jesus.

Why then do we see carved images in Roman Catholicism, just like in Hinduism? It is because they have departed from the teaching of Scripture and followed man made teaching. Every man made religion has some man made object of worship. We all want some tangible object to worship and so make something – unless we listen to what God commands.

If Roman Catholics choose not to obey this command it will come as no surprise that they choose not to obey other parts of the Bible. For example, it is natural for man to think that he can in some way merit God's favour. Millions think that they will go to heaven because they do good works. Some accept that their good works are insufficient but believe, according to the teaching of Roman Catholicism, that the good works of others can somehow be passed on to them – those who have an overabundance of good works!

What does God say about our good works? All our good works are like filthy rags before God (Isaiah 64:6). No one is saved by keeping the law but only by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16). Breaking just one part of God's law makes us guilty of it all (James 2:10). By grace alone, through faith alone, we are saved from our sin – it is the gift of God and NOT of works (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

In India students are fond of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. They make an idol and worship it for a few weeks before carrying it down to the river and throwing it in. In Australia two large planks of wood (a cross) are being carried around in the lead up to World Youth Day. Initially blessed by the Pope, hundreds have been kissing (worshipping?) these pieces of wood. They will end up in Sydney as the focus of worship. Will they be thrown into the harbour? No – they will probably be added to the already overflowing store of images, icons and relics kept and adored by the Church of Rome.

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