

God Is With Us

Why are we hearing about 'a new heaven and a new earth', six days after the birth of Christ? Isn't it a bit soon to be thinking about the end of the world, when we've only just relived the story of Bethlehem? John, the author of Revelation, writes, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people and God himself will be with them'. At the end of time, the truth of Christmas, Emmanuel, God is with us, is reiterated.

As I started writing this sermon in the library of our dorm for overseas graduates in London, I started thinking, 'I have nothing to say. It's me that needs to hear a sermon, not preach it. I have heard wonderful sermons in my life, but I'm not tuned into God enough to reach the spirits of Woodbrook folk, after all they have been fed on a wonderful diet of preaching for the last 30 years. God please work a miracle and help me say something meaningful'. Then I started thinking about what I would like to hear in a sermon at this time in my life. I hope what I want to hear might be relevant to you too.

What I want to hear is, 'God is with us' but I want to know it is really true. It's often very hard to hear the words of the Scriptures with keen ears. Especially at Christmas, most of us have heard these words so many times, that it's hard for the truth of the stories to grab us and speak to us in the depths of our hearts.

'God is with us'. The sceptical realist in me thinks that's just not true. If God is with us, why is it so hard to pray and to feel God's presence? Part of the explanation for this is this is just the way things are - we are human and we are in the in between time, after the earthly ministry of Jesus and before the new heaven and new earth arrive. But we are also partially responsible for our ability or inability to perceive the presence of God with us in our daily lives.

I am reading a book by a Canadian monk called Ronald Rolheiser on rediscovering God's presence in everyday life. Rolheiser thinks there are three modern sins that get in the way of our being able to deeply know God's presence.

First, narcissism, anxiety that becomes so tight so it also becomes selfish. One of my bad habits is getting over-anxious. When I was looking for a job in London, we had a three week period when one week I was really anxious about not finding a job, the next week I was really anxious about whether I should accept a job offer and the last week I was really anxious about whether the decision to accept the job offer was right! Poor Chris! Yes, jobs are important, but is my anxiety clouding my perception, so that the way I see the world is dramatically reduced by my worries? If I could take responsibility for my anxiety and hold my worries more lightly, could I come to the created world with a fuller vision, more able to see God, rather than only seeing reality in terms of my little individual life?

Another bad habit of mine is analysing social situations. I always come away from social events with friends, family or acquaintances asking Chris, 'Was I okay? Was I rude? Was I stupid?'. But by doing this, I am allowing my self preoccupation to get in the way of other people just being who they are. Maybe I am missing their qualities by obsessing about whether they like me or not. Our desire to be beautiful, successful, popular and to do our own thing can get in the way of us perceiving God in poverty, ugliness, failure and circumstances we haven't chosen

Rolheiser's second sin is pragmatism. In the modern world value lies in achievement so we tend to take our sense of worth from what we do rather than who we are. We have more time for activities that are

useful and less time for those that feed our inner being. We admire efficiency, but we have forgotten about mystery. We often end up like the people who refused to come to the wedding banquet in Jesus' parable. They never showed up because they were too busy buying oxen, getting married and measuring land. I am guilty of the sin of pragmatism. I want to pray, I know I should pray, but I don't make the time for it. And when I do find the time, I always spend far more time clearing my desk of papers than actually praying. Since prayer is hard work, sometimes it feels easier to pay bills than to achieve the inner stillness that prayer requires.

We know the value of the intangible, mysterious yet are we choosing to act in our daily lives in a way that cultivates our spirits or neglects them? Are we living our lives in a way that gives God the opportunity to be with us or not?

Sin three is unbridled restlessness. We are greedy for experience, we want to experience everything, travel everywhere, never miss out on an opportunity. And this leads to dissatisfaction with our lot. We often see our lives impatiently in terms of what we have a right to, rather than responding to life with reverence and respect. There is nothing wrong with restlessness. Augustine said, 'We are restless' But we have a choice as to what we do with our longings. We can impatiently quench our desires prematurely leaving us feeling cynical and tired or we can wait.

Thomas Merton, the American monk, once wrote:
It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with one's hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth, rising and going to bed. Putting on blankets and taking them off, making coffee and then drinking it. Defrosting the refrigerator, reading, meditating, working, praying, I live as my fathers have lived on this earth, until eventually I die. Amen. We needn't feel dissatisfied if we don't experience everything, because God, the Alpha and the Omega, who alone can satisfy our deepest longings, can be found in making coffee and drinking it, if only we could clear our hearts and minds to perceive and receive him.

One of the ways that I suggest we begin to recover our capacity to recognise God in our lives is to use the passage from Ecclesiastes. There is a time when worry is understandable, but there is a time when we take it too far. There is a time to pursue success, but there is also a time for failure. There are times when we will be busy, but we must make sure there are times for mystery and silence. There are times for new experiences and there are times to wait. There are times to say yes and times to say no. A friend of ours wrote a song that goes like this:

The greatest enemy of God's will for your life
Is all the good things others want you to do
You keep saying yes, 'til there's no time left
To do what you're most deeply called to do.
You know 'yes' doesn't mean much if you never say no
Are you doing what you're meant to do?
Don't let the good things take what's best from you.

And God is with us whether we recognise him or not, but if we don't recognise him we may miss the wedding banquet.

And more seriously, God with us is not just about feeling comforted. It's a challenge to the way we live. After John has described the new heaven and the new earth, he writes, 'as for the cowards, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all the liars, their place will be in

the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death'. Similarly in Matthew 25 which is the lectionary gospel reading for today, Matthew writes, 'Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life'.

I am not intending to preach doom, gloom, hell, fire and brimstone. I do want to say that our failure to reckon with Emmanuel has consequences.

So this Christmas, let us allow the reality of the infant Jesus, Emmanuel, God is really with us, to sink deeply into our hearts, minds and spirits, so that our deepest longings might be satisfied and that when Jesus says, 'Follow me' we can hear.

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