

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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GOD WITH US

18th December 2016

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

"Where is God in all this?" I wonder in what circumstances you have heard someone – it might have been yourself – ask this question: where is God in all this? Maybe it has been when you have had to face some personal pain – a bereavement which has hit you hard, a family break up, and difficult diagnosis from the doctor. Maybe it is when you have seen or heard of situations which may be half a world away from us here, but which can still appal us – starving children in Yemen, mere skeletons, covered in skin; eight-year-old girls being used as suicide bombers in north-east Nigeria; the horrors of Aleppo and of the refugee crisis which continues to unfold before us. Where is God in all this? It is a legitimate question.

It is also a question which has often been asked from time immemorial. The people of Israel asked where God was when they were slaves in Egypt; they asked again and again, even when God had sent Moses to free them successfully and they were then wandering in the desert - going to the Promised Land. At every little set-back, which, to be fair, probably didn't feel little at the time, they asked "Where is God?" When they reached the promised land and in time had kings of their own, every time a king let them down, or their own behaviour resulted in judgement, they asked again – where is God?

We read today of such a situation. The prophet Isaiah is attempting, on behalf of God, to advise King Ahaz during a crisis in which Assyria is threatening the very existence of "the House of David". The people are asking "Where is God?" but when Isaiah offers the king the chance to ask for a sign that God is in fact with them, he refuses. Maybe he didn't want to be let down. He makes his answer sound pious, but there has been little real piety in his actions. For he has not asked for help from God, but he has already prepared to send a delegation to strike a bargain with Assyria. Ahaz doesn't think God is in his current situation at all.

Maybe Ahaz is like a lot of people, before him and since him, who, if they don't actually blame God for what is happening – and some do – they use current circumstances as a reason to stop believing in him. Does that ring any bells with you? Are there people who come to mind? Here's just one who comes to my mind. I went to university a couple of years after my father had died. One of the first people I met there was a girl whose father had also died, at about the same time. I remember that she could not believe that I still had faith in God after my bereavement, while I

could not understand why she would have turned from the God who had given me my best support through some difficult times.

In Ahaz' case, Isaiah insists on giving him God's sign, the sign of Immanuel: Immanuel, which means God is with us. The specifics are that by the time a woman now pregnant has raised her son – Immanuel – to the stage of weaning him, so within about two years from the time Isaiah was speaking, God would have sorted out the current threat to the nation. The Jews have traditionally taken the promise of Immanuel to say that the child would be King Hezekiah who brought a new era of hope and faith to a beleaguered people; and that the prophecy also is a declaration that there will always be a Davidic king to rule in Jerusalem. However, in line with chapters 9 and 11 of Isaiah, Christians take this passage as another prophecy of hope, as well as judgement. Where human beings could not resolve their situation, God intervenes – with his promise of the child, Jesus, who will be the Redeemer of all. Jesus, also named Immanuel, God with us.

God is with us, God is in the situations that trouble us. God is the one who makes the right choices with us, even when we don't want to. Ahaz sounded pious when he refused God's offer of a sign. He used almost the same words, words found earlier in Scripture, which Jesus used when he was tempted in the wilderness. He said "I will not put the Lord to the test." It sounded like the right thing to say, the right thing to do, or in this case not to do. But it was not. There was a deeper rightness, or righteousness, and Isaiah made that clear. Ahaz needed this sign, the sign of Immanuel. He needed it for himself and he needed it for his people. It was not, in fact, the offer of a sign which God gave him, but the command to have one.

The Christmas story is full of challenges to our understanding of what is right, or of righteousness. It is full of challenges to the way we look at life, and to the places we look for God. This morning we read that Joseph was a righteous man and so when he heard of the coming baby, he was going to put Mary aside, quietly. To do it quietly would be the right thing, the good thing. He was not going to make an issue of it; he was not going to make a scandal about it. But what he intended to do was only one level of righteousness. It was the right option under the law. But righteousness, which is being right with God, doing God's right thing, is not a matter of law, but of grace. It is not about doing what you must but what you may. In this case, the deeper righteousness – which is rightness before God – was to do what looked like legally the wrong thing, but was the loving thing, and take Mary and be a father to her child.

The Christmas story, which turns law into grace and brings God among us in love, not judgement is one which is meant to challenge us. The challenge it brings is that we are able to find Immanuel, God with us in everything.

As our world goes into full-scale Christmas preparation, people could legitimately ask us – where is God in Christmas? Have you ever thought of the celebrations of Christmas in this way: Christmas is celebrated in mid-winter (in the northern hemisphere) because Christianity hijacked the mid-winter solstice celebrations which were there in many countries before Christianity came – but now Christmas itself is being hijacked back into a mid-winter festival which does not really demand faith. And where is God in this?

When people ask, where is God in Christmas, they are asking about meaning, deep meaning in life. Why is there enormous pressure to spend more than you have, to drink and eat more than you should, and to decorate your house, to have and go to parties. Is God in this? Where is God in this? And why should we celebrate, and what is there to celebrate after a year such as the world has come through, and with the future looking no more hopeful than the year that is past? Where is God in this? God is in the simple things of life, in the birth of a baby, in the birth of every baby as well as in the birth of the one who grew up to show us that God is with us. God is in a husband, thinking himself deceived but deciding to love his wife anyway; in Joseph's story, but also in every story of love and second chances. It may sound romantic, but it is through mercy and second chances that love and grace come to enlighten the world, come to change it from a place of law and hard edges to a place of loving relationship. Mercy and grace begin with God, but God is in every merciful and gracious act in this world: including those you experience and those you are called on to make.

God is in the painful things of life. It was painful for Joseph to have to accept that to some he would look like settling for second best; it was a blow to his pride. God is in that pain, and in the pain of all who loving, make themselves vulnerable. God is in the pain of the misunderstood, and of those who loving, then become lonely. God is in the pain of insecurity. Joseph and Mary were allowing their lives to be altered by God and they no longer knew where life might take them. God is in the pain of those whose children have been torn from them, who have lost home and security, who have wept in the night. God came among us, God came as Immanuel, to show us that he really is with us in these times, not just watching from afar. God with us does not mean that these things will not happen. The coming of Jesus was not a "happy ever after" ending. But it was and is a change in perspective and a beam of hope into the most desperate situations.

The Christmas story tells us that God is with us when the political powers seem to be out of control and we feel like pawns in their hands. Over the next weeks we will read about Caesar and his census, and about Herod and his desperation to hold on to his power. There is nothing new about political power feeling hostile and at odds with what seems to be natural justice and the common good. But God has not abandoned us, he is with us in it all, even though political power should persecute us, as it did the infant Christ, or do us to death, as happened to Jesus, none of it is out of God's hands. All of it can be used to his glory and to further the redemption of creation. That is hard to believe sometimes. It is particularly hard to believe when we watch things happen in which we are not involved, which leave us feeling horrified and powerless. How can God be there? But those in these circumstances all who turn to God will tell you that in their desperation they know most clearly that despite it all, or because of it, God is with us.

When you come to the heart of the Christmas story, and the Christmas message it is simply God. There is nothing else there at the heart of Christmas but God himself. God, not remote and above us, but God with us. How can we ask where God is in Christmas, or in any of its celebrations, if gone into in the spirit of praise and joy and worship? It is a time when we celebrate his love, with music and candle light, shared food and drink, and presents given and received in his name. These are good things, when used to celebrate what is most worthy of celebration. And if our

very celebration highlights to us the plight of others, living in poverty and fear and hopelessness, then seeking to do all we can to help them should surely be our greatest joy.

God is in Christmas, for Christmas is God coming into the world, coming to turn law into grace, to challenge us to live in deeper love and relationship with God and with each other, challenging us to find God's righteousness and to embrace it no matter the cost. And it's a time for pausing to reach out to those who don't know where God is, in Christmas or in anything else. A time to reach out in love because of Immanuel. Amen.

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