

Trinity 11 2011

God is with his people. And who are they? According to the Old Testament they are the descendants of Abraham that Moses brought out of Egypt into the promised land. That is the overwhelming message of the Old Testament. God is faithful to those that are faithful to him. He loves his people and sent his prophets to warn them to keep faithful, to turn from their wicked ways.

Ezekiel was one such prophet. He was a prophet of the exile and spent ten years in Babylon preaching to the exiled Jews. He uses every means available to try to persuade the exiled Jews to keep faith. His words are of extraordinary and terrifying visions. Some of his imagery is never read in church, because it would require an X certificate and not quite what we associate with religious texts. But always, the aim is to help Israel to come back to God. And if sometimes when we read the old testament we wonder why it is all about the important people, the rulers and leaders, that is because it is the way in which the whole nation acts that is important. There will always be good people and bad people, but how is Israel behaving? What is the character of the nation? Even in exile, the nation must never forget that it has a corporate identity that is important to God.

Emmanuel, God with us, is the theme of the New Testament too. But who do we mean by us?

We have been reading Matthew's gospel all year, a gospel which in its first chapter declares of the birth of Christ – 'and all this happened to fulfil what the Lord declared through the prophet: "a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us."' But the prophets meant the House of Israel.

But all the way through this gospel, we are challenged by that small word 'us'.

The gospel of St Matthew was almost certainly written for a Jewish Christian community. The whole tone of the gospel would be understandable to a Jew. It includes transliterated Aramaic words, details of Jewish customs, and emphasises Jesus' respect for Jewish law. It is this gospel that introduces the term Son of David for Jesus. Over and over again it refers to events as demonstrating the fulfilment of the prophets. And yet there is undeniable hostility to official Judaism. Anger at the way in which some Pharisees behave. What we are seeing in this gospel is the working out of the tensions that arise from being both Jewish and a Christian.

Because the problem is that not all the Jews, indeed very few of the Jews, accepted that Jesus was the Messiah. So Matthew, writing some considerable time after the death of Christ, is able to look back at the events in the lifetime of Jesus and interpret them in the light of the emerging Christian church.

In every age and in every church there are occasional difficulties – people who do not adhere to the moral code. This was certainly true in the early Christian church and it was true in the synagogues frequented by Jesus. Jesus spells out how such problems should be approached. First, a quiet word. If that doesn't work, then two people should visit and attempt to persuade the wrongdoer to mend their ways and make amends. If that doesn't work, then the whole congregation should be involved. And if that doesn't bring the person to his or her senses then they can no longer be considered to be a part of that community.

I must admit that have never yet brought someone before the entire congregation, but I can imagine circumstances when the church is being brought into ill repute when it could become necessary, but it can only be done when you are sure that if the person repents and wants to make amends, that they will be accepted and forgiven by the whole community – otherwise all that is achieved is humiliation and resentment.

For the writer of St Matthew's gospel, these words of Jesus would have had a very particular resonance. The faithful Jews who believed that Jesus was indeed the fulfilment of the scriptures would find that other members of their synagogue could not agree. There would be strong arguments about who could worship there, and the Jewish Christians found that they were often excluded, and had to meet separately.

How hugely comforting to be able to remember the words of Jesus: **where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.** And here is the 'us' of St Matthew's gospel. It refers to the church, the followers of Christ, whether a small or a large gathering.

But for most of the Jewish Christians, rejecting their roots, their Jewish history, the belonging to the House of Israel was unthinkable. 'Us' had to mean the House of Israel.

But what if there was a New Israel? It is in St Matthew's gospel that we have the parable of the Messianic banquet. Those that were invited to the feast made excuses, failed to turn up, so others were invited, even the waifs and strays. It is in Matthew's gospel that Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and told that he is the rock on which the church will be founded. It is no longer to be a race of people by birth right, but a people chosen by their discipleship. The new Israel, God's new people, can be gentile or Jew, male or female, slave or free. God will be with them. Jesus will be with them.

Jesus disciples, the new Israel, are given a new covenant, the blood that Jesus sheds: *'for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'*.

Throughout this gospel we are seeing the old order overturned and a new order emerging.

And here we are, two thousand years later, coming from different backgrounds, with different faith stories to tell, sometimes strong in our faith, sometimes weak, sometimes remembering to pray and read the bible, sometimes forgetting, but united by being here, being a part of the church. We are here in the name of Christ, and that means that even if our faith is a bit wobbly today, or we haven't followed Christ's teaching this past week, He is with us. For when two or three are gathered together in his name, he is among them.

Yes, we can and should pray alone, in the garden or on a walk. But all the way through the bible it is 'us' that matters. It is the community, the working together, worshipping together, suffering together, rejoicing together.

And the final words of this amazing gospel are : 'I will be with you always, until the end of time.'

Emmanuel, God with us, through thick and thin. Thank God we are part fo a community of faith.
Amen.