

**Real Presence and the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 28.16-20)**

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If you're a keen reader of the bible you'll know that though each of the four gospels tells the story of Jesus in different ways. This year, the lectionary draws mostly from Matthew, and as we launch into the year, I thought we'd spend some time considering the gospel as a whole. This will help us to read it less in a piece meal fashion and more in the light of its distinctive concerns, questions and context. Today, we'll looking at the theme of God's presence and what this might mean for us as disciples.

The promise that God *is*, and *will be*, with his disciples occurs at the beginning and end of Matthew's gospel. In Chapter 1, Joseph is reassured in a dream by '*an angel of the Lord*' that what is happening for Mary, his fiancé, (her being found to 'be with' child) fulfils the words of the prophet: '*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel*' which means '*God is with us*' (1.23). At the end of the gospel, the risen Christ appears one last time and commissions the disciples as missionaries to the nations with the words, '*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*' (28.20). Unlike, in Luke, there's no reference to the ascension – to his leaving. In Matthew, this is the closing sentence: '*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*'. These are the very last words in the gospel.

But this divine with-us-ness, what is it? How does God, in Jesus, abide with us?

Throughout history, different denominations have appreciated this differently and emphasised different dimensions of this promised presence. Traditionally, Catholicism has recognised Jesus in the ‘church’ and sacraments – in the celebration of Mass, baptism, marriage, reconciliation and so on. In other words, God’s presence is assumed as a literal, physical, objective fact – Jesus is present in these expressions of religious life and whatever we happen to feel at any given moment is more or less irrelevant. Here, the presence of God is not something we generate – it is given to the church, and to disciples through baptism; sourced in God’s faithfulness and appropriated through participation in the sacramental life of the church.

At its best, this approach enables people to relax into the promise of grace, to receive the gift as given. Yet a danger with this is that it can happen without us, as somehow separate from us. We’re invited to participate but that participation can become mechanical obligation, mere repetition rather than personal engagement in which transformation takes place. In other words, we participate but we’re not really involved, we’re reciting the words, going through the motions, but at a kind of distance, on the outside. This can leave us feeling dissatisfied, inauthentic and excluded from the party.

The Protestant tradition, to some extent in reaction to crude distortions of this, has emphasised the need for subjective involvement. Here it’s important to give your heart to Jesus, and abide in him day by day. In this understanding, God’s presence is assured, not so much by objective membership in the church, or even by regularly partaking in the sacraments, but by belief and obedience, expressed through faithful participation in

worship, ministry, outreach, bible reading, prayer, giving, and so on. At its best, this approach emphasises the need for transformation and personal involvement in the work of grace. At its worst, it becomes a kind of privatised spirituality based on my belief, my effort and my experience. Here, people can become self-righteous and neurotic and end up suspecting the spiritual state and commitment of others – ‘are you really saved... born again?’ I’m ‘worried’ because you’re not using the right language, or doing enough of this or that or doing too much of this or that (drinking, smoking, dancing, laughing). This can leave people feeling inadequate and excluded from the party.

Well, I want to suggest that the divine presence and companionship that Jesus promises in Matthew’s gospel is neither of these, certainly not in their crudest forms, but is about something bigger and more exciting. Jesus calls it: ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’.

In this little series, next week, in fact, I attend to the ‘Jewishness’ of this gospel; to the way Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of the law (Torah) and as ‘prophet’ supreme in the Hebrew tradition. But this emphasis on Jewishness should not blind us to the overarching *Roman* context of Jesus’ life and ministry, and of Matthew’s embryonic church. One of the striking things about this imperial context, is that the Roman emperor also claimed to be the very presence of God on earth, which means that Matthew’s insistence on Jesus’ sovereign presence and divinity must be heard in counterpoint with this imperial ideology.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

The contrast between these kingdoms, these two claims to divine presence, is radical. The 'kingdom' of the 'divine' Roman emperor was sustained by military might, exploitative taxation and the enforced labour of subjugated peoples. Most of the residents of this kingdom lived at subsistence level and under the ever-present threat of violence and reprisal. In contrast, the supposedly divine Emperor and his coterie enjoyed the fruits of their labour. To define divinity with reference to the Emperor was to align God with oppressive, exclusive power and the rule of might. Jesus proclaimed a radically different kingdom. 'Instead of a hierarchical, exploitative, exclusionary community based on "their great ones being tyrants over them" (20. 25-26)', the gospel 'creates an inclusive, merciful, egalitarian community based on practical, merciful, loving service to others'.<sup>2</sup> And this is not simply a new social vision but a new theological vision. God is aligned with this reality, says Jesus. God embodies this reality; where this reality is, there God is present.

For example, it's in Matthew that Jesus says, '*when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*' (18.20). And what it means to be gathered 'in Jesus' name' is given by the context – which is to do with restoring fractured relationships. 'Real presence occurs when two or three engage in the challenging business of reconciliation' writes NT scholar David Neville.<sup>3</sup> . Not extortion, reconciliation; not punishment, restoration. In Matthew 25, Jesus' end-time story about the separation of sheep and goats, we get another glimpse of what divine presence consists in. Here, Jesus insists (at some length) that those worthy of eternal life are those who care for the hungry, the

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<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> David Neville, 'Things New and Old: Preaching from Matthew in Year A', *St Mark's Review*, No.216, May 2011(2).

sick, the stranger and the prisoner. 'But notice the way Jesus identifies with these different groups. He conveys it in personal terms: when *I* was hungry, he says, when *I* was thirsty, when *I* was a stranger in your midst, when *I* had nothing... *I* was sick... *I* was in prison'. The sheep didn't know it was Jesus they were tending – but the point is that in these situations of need he was present, and that in responding with compassion the respondents were participating in God's transforming presence in the world.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out enacting *this* way of being, bearing this kingdom in word and deed. In doing this, they both experience and make manifest his presence.

Divine presence, then, is not just about Jesus in the church and sacraments (though he is), and it's not just about Jesus in my heart (though he is), it's about the inbreaking of the possibility of a whole new way of seeing and being in the world – merciful and compassionate, truthful, humble and just, trusting and obedient. A reality that we are invited to recognise and enter, to discover this presence as the reality in which we may live and move and have our being.

This morning, on the feast of Epiphany, the celebration of light and glory, we gather in gloom and bewilderment. Many in our country fear for their lives and the lives of those they love, a thick pall of smoke overshadows us, beloved places, plants and animals are suffering in utterly unprecedented ways. Even so, we gather around this table to enact the kingdom of Heaven. We share the gift of God's promised presence - in bread and wine, in our being reconciled with one another, in our tenderness and care with one another's

fear and grief. And, we look for and pray that the kingdom of Heaven, of compassion, mercy and justice may reign and restore. Lord, may your kingdom come...