

GOD IS WITH US.

Readings: Matt. 1 v 20-25; John 1 v 14; Ex 34 v 5-8.

Eye witnesses reported that John Wesley's last complete sentence on his death bed was "the best of all is that God is with us." The scriptures are full of God's promises to be with His people:

Joshua, as he is about to lead the Israelite rabble into the Promised Land (Deut.31 v 6 & Josh. 1 v 5).

The exiles as they faced the 600 miles trudge back from Babylon with the threat of "deep waters" or "fiery trials" (Is. 43 v 2).

Zerubbabel and Joshua as they faced the daunting task of trying to rebuild the Temple out of the burnt-out rubble of what remained of Jerusalem after its destruction (Hag. 1 v 13, & 2 v 4).

Paul as he took the gospel to the most immoral city in the Roman Empire (Acts 18 v 10).

And of course, the wonderful promise given to all of us in Heb. 13 v 5:

Never will I leave you,

Never will I forsake you.

At the time of writing, we do not know if the Covid restrictions on churches meeting together will be lifted or not at the end of January, but all of us need to know that God is with us, and He is at work. He is NOT "Locked down" – He can pop up in a fiery furnace (Dan. 3 v 25), and Jesus on several occasions appeared through locked doors to meet with his frightened disciples. God is not limited. The challenge for us is have we learned to meet with Him on our own, when we cannot meet up with other Christians? Do we believe He is with us when we feel lonely, isolated or depressed? A few years ago some Pentecostal friends of mine were led by the Lord to move up into the North-west Highlands of Scotland, where the only options for worship were a variety of rather dour Highland Presbyterian denominations. They heard the Lord say very clearly "You must learn to dig your own wells". If you feel you are currently living in a desert, then listen to what a French friend of mine said a few months ago: "God is taking His people into the wilderness, but remember, the desert is a place of encounter with God"!

However, there is something deeper that I would like to share while we are still in this post-Christmas period. Have you ever noticed that Matthew's is the only gospel that starts with the promise of "Immanuel" (in 1 v 23 "God with us"), and also ends with the promise that Jesus is with us to the end of the age (28 v 20)? I do not believe it is coincidence when a book begins and ends with the same theme, so is there more behind Matthew's thinking? Remember he is steeped in the OT and was writing for a Jewish audience who also knew the scriptures well. Did he also have in mind the story of when God really revealed Himself to Moses: in Ex. 3 v 12, when God said "I will be with you", then went on to reveal His Name to Moses in verse 14 in the well-known encounter with Moses at the burning bush? Now jump forward to Ex 33 v 19 where the Lord (having again promised to be with Moses in v14) says He will proclaim His Name to Moses, and goes onto describe Himself to Moses as "the Compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands..." (34 v 6). For the Hebrews, one's name indicated one's character. Can I suggest that the Hebrew word "Chesed" meaning covenant love/ faithfulness/commitment is replaced in the NT by the word "AGAPE"? Although often translated simply as "love", it bears the deeper meaning of devoted, faithful, sacrificial commitment, which is what Jesus demonstrated to His followers, and what He calls us to.

Sometimes people have struggled with the seeming contrast between a seemingly angry God in the OT and the emphasis on love in the NT, but here is no contradiction: the God Who promised to live in the midst of His people in the wilderness tent, is the same One who "pitched His tent among us" in

John 1 v14, and today lives both in the new “temple” of His church (as in 2 Cor.6 v 16; Eph.2 v 22.), and in the sanctuary of the individual believer (as in 1Cor. 6 v 19 & 1Pet.2 v 5). Yes, there is an anger expressed in Ex. 34 v 7 but this is only for a couple of generations, whereas His mercy extended to “thousands”. The sad truth is that our sin may have consequences for our future generations, and that is what made Jesus express anger at sin on several occasions; our sin does affect other people (Matt. 23 v 13; see also Heb. 12 v 15), which is why it is so serious.

Just as the glory of God was seen by Moses in the Exodus stories, so also the Glory of Our Lord Jesus is displayed in John 1 v 14. There is no conflict between the OT and the NT: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory, and the exact representation of His being” (Heb.1 v 3), or as Jesus Himself put it so simply “he who has seen Me has seen the Father “(Jn. 14 v 9). The same God Who is with us TODAY! We do not need to fear Him, but we do need to seek for and enter His presence (Heb.10 v 22) by ourselves, as well as with others.