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Real Presence and the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28. 16-20)

Sarah Bachelard

The promise that God is and will be with us appears at the beginning and at the end of Matthew's gospel. In Chapter 1, Joseph is reassured in a dream by 'an angel of the Lord' that the child conceived in Mary fulfils the words of the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel' which means 'God is with us' (1.23). And at the very end of the gospel, the risen Jesus appears one last time to his disciples, sending them into the world with the words, 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (28.20). Significantly, there is no reference to the ascension of Jesus to heaven in Matthew. Jesus is God's presence in the world and Jesus abides, companioning, accompanying, and incorporating those who obey him into the divine life.

But divine presence ... Real Presence ... What are we talking about here? What does it mean to say that *God* is with us, and how would we know?

Christian churches have often emphasised different dimensions of this promised presence. Traditionally, the Roman Catholic tradition has tended to emphasise the presence of Jesus in the church and the sacraments of the church – Eucharist, baptism, reconciliation and so on. This is something like an objective fact – Jesus is present, because Jesus has promised to be present, and whatever we happen (subjectively) to feel or experience at any given moment is more or less irrelevant. The presence of God is not something we generate – it is given to the church and to us through our baptism,

and our reliance upon it is sourced in God's faithfulness, rather than in anything we do or think. Salvation is through our participation in this objective reality.

At its best, this approach enables us to relax into the promise of grace, to receive the gift that is given. Yet a danger with this emphasis on the objective presence of Christ in, say, the church and the sacraments is that it can all start to go on without us – it's just over there, somehow separate from us. We are not drawn into this reality in a way that transforms our subjectivity – leaving many feeling inadequate and excluded from the party.

The Protestant tradition, to some extent in reaction to this problem, has tended to emphasise the necessity for a subjective experience of Jesus' presence in the life of the believer. What matters is whether we know Jesus in our hearts, and have a personal relationship with him. Church and sacraments are not such privileged sites for encountering God, and our salvation is assured, not by our participation in the body of Christ, but through our personal belief and subjective experience. At its best, this approach emphasises the necessity for personal transformation and involvement in the work of grace. At its worst, it becomes a privatised spirituality in search of emotional highs – the 'Jesus is my boyfriend' approach, which can end up suspecting the Christian credentials of others – 'are you really saved? have you been born again?' – leaving many feeling inadequate and excluded from the party.

Well, I want to suggest that the divine presence and companionship that Jesus promises at the end of Matthew's gospel is neither simply objective, nor simply subjective, but something bigger and more exciting than either of those categories. Jesus calls it the 'kingdom of God'.

In our series on Matthew, I have emphasised the 'Jewishness' of this gospel – and we have noticed how Matthew emphasises Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and

the prophets of the Hebrew tradition. But this emphasis on the Jewish context of Matthew's community should not blind us to the overarching *Roman* and imperial context of Jesus' life and ministry, and of Matthew's embryonic church. One of the striking things about this imperial context, according to biblical scholar Warren Carter, is that the Roman emperor also claimed to be the very presence of God on earth, which means that Matthew's insistence on Jesus' sovereignty and divinity must be heard in counterpoint with this Roman imperial theology. It is a social and political claim, as much as a theological one.¹

The contrasts between the two empires, the two claims to divine presence, are radical. Rome's empire was sustained by military might and exploitative taxation, a small ruling elite governing the vast majority. Carter writes that between 30 and 70 per cent of the goods produced by peasants and artisans was claimed in tax, and forced labour was exacted for the majority of the empire's building and land improvement projects. Most lived at subsistence level and under threat of violence, while the 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 proclaims a radically different society. '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'.² 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 is God.

Matthew's Jesus says, for example, that 'when two or three are gathered in my, I am there among them' (18.20). And what it means to be gathered 'in Jesus' name' is given by the context of this promise – which is not proffered (as we often read it) as a

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

² Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 53.

reassurance to dwindling churches, but with reference to Jesus' command that a Christian community actively seek reconciliation with those who have offended or strayed. 'Real presence occurs', writes David Neville, 'when two or three engage in the challenging business of reconciliation'.³ And turning to Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus' end-time scenario of the separation of sheep and goats, we get another glimpse of what divine presence consists in. Neville notices that, while Matthew ordinarily writes concisely, in this passage he is 'ever so repetitive' and that that 'is telling'. Jesus insists that those who are judged to be sheep and worthy of eternal life are those who care for the hungry, the sick, the stranger and the prisoner. 'But notice the divine equation: *I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger in your midst, I had nothing, I was sick, I was incarcerated*'.⁴ The sheep did not know it was Jesus whose needs they were tending – but the point is that in meeting human need they in fact encountered Emmanuel, God with us, and were drawn into God's transforming agency in the world.

So, at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus claims that it is *this* kingdom, *this* way of being in and seeing the world that is sovereign. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'. And he sends his disciples, those who have already recognised this profoundly counter-cultural kingdom, to baptise all nations – drawing them into this same pattern of life, 'teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'.

Divine presence, then, is not first about Jesus out there – in the church, in the sacraments – or in here, in my heart, in my warm fuzzy feelings, but is about the inbreaking of the possibility of a whole new, subversive, inclusive, merciful way of seeing and being and acting in the world. Of course, this reality transcends and enfolds me – it is objectively present, including in church and sacrament; of course it transforms and changes me from within – it is subjectively experienced. Ultimately, though, I am invited to let this possibility, this presence be the reality in which I live and more and

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

⁴ Neville, 'Things New and Old'.

have my being. I am called to become myself a participant in this reality in the midst of whatever shape 'Rome' takes in every age. And that is what it means to be baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – being immersed in, absorbed into the identity of God and to participate in life *as* the presence of God on earth. And amazingly, it is the great Sufi mystic Rumi who really gets it, and who wonderfully announces that: “Lo, I am with you always,” means when you look for God, God is in the look of your eyes’.⁵

⁵ Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again & Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 131.