

Sermon Archive 512

Sunday 8 December, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Matthew 1: 18-23

Revelation 21: 1-4

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



On the front page of the order of service, there's a photo of the large, grey facade to the now ruined and removed Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament that stood in Barbadoes Street. The angels are kneeling at the foot of the cross. Heavenly creatures have their knees getting grubby on the ground. The dark sky is conjuring up feelings of momentous heaviness as the cost emerges of realms crashing each into the other. And the words below it all: *Ecce tabernaculum Dei cum hominibus* - "behold, the tabernacle of God is among humanity / with humanity. God is here. God is with us.

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Maurice Andrew is a well-respected Emeritus Professor of Old Testament, who lives in Dunedin. I consider him a friend, and attribute my being a minister in significant part to his support of me when I was a struggling student. In retirement, he has written and had published a number of books; and most recently he's been working on a wee project exploring a question that has been with him over some years. It's the question of why we are happy to consider the idea of "God with us" a kind of seasonal wrapping for our Christmas Faith, and not something utterly basic to how we understand the God we find in the scriptures.

In an early draft of the introduction to his work, this is what Maurice wrote:

"Many people assume that whether God exists is the crucial matter, and that it is necessary to be able to advance valid arguments for it . . . When people ask, "Do you believe in God?", they are often thinking of a being who exists somewhere apart . . . Most of us, in any case, still need to live with creation, with other humans, animals, birds, insects, trees and plants etc. Some of us claim that the most important matter is God with us in our life with these our fellow creatures . . . All this raises the question whether the existence of God as a being apart is the crucial issue, and not rather a matter of corporate relationship. In this connection, some Catholics are now annoyed that, in the Creed, they are again expected to confess "I believe in God... " rather than "We believe...". Along with others they also affirm that it is not simply a matter of what one person thinks now, but of affirming God's relation in past and present to other people and creation. From the whole course of our lives, it is more appropriate that we know and affirm that God is with us. This is certainly sometimes in individual meditation when apparently only God and the person involved are involved. In the course of most people's lives, however, it is more essential that God is with us not only at an isolated point, but in the context of various spheres of ordinary life with creation and other people."

In the chapters that follow the introduction, Maurice explores the different spheres of ordinary life for human beings, looking particularly at human beings whose marginalisation from and by the church has suggested to them that "God is not with them". Well, not with them, in that God does not stand by who they are.

Maurice's first chapter looks at the way that the church refused to ordain women to ministry. Yes, God was with women, the church said, but not in a way that made women serious contenders for leadership in the church. This was the case in our Presbyterian denomination until 1969, and some will say still is the case behind the scenes in various chambers of the church. It's certainly still true in some other denominations where woman are not ordained. Maurice looks at how, in response to this refusal to ordain, a growing movement arose of feminist theology. Maurice notes two main prongs that were taken up by the movement. The first was to highlight the significant, but often unrecognised contributions made in sacred story of characters who were women. Not just Abraham, but Abraham and Sarah. Not just Moses, but Moses and Miriam. And as for Ruth, what was her husband's name? Didn't matter, really. Ruth was doing it for herself! Taking the women of sacred story as serious people in themselves. No longer ignoring them, but naming them, celebrating them, rejoicing in their being women.

The second feminist prong was exploring the many different ways in which human imagery had been used to describe God. "Father", yes. "Lord", of course. But the Spirit was in the feminine gender. There was the mother hen gathering her chicks beneath her wings. The Bible was full of female imagery

for God - and exploring that gave the feminist movement a sense that this was their God - their image was found within the story - the same story that had Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, Mary, Mary and Mary, Martha and Mary. Women saw themselves in the story and in the way that God was being described. And all this fed into an understanding that God was with them. It's no physical placement "with"; it's an affirming "I am with you in who you are". God with us.

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Maurice wanted to follow up his chapter on women reclaiming a sense of God being with them (despite the church not taking them seriously), with a chapter on whether the same was true for Rainbow people. Since I'm an expert on such matters (ha!), he contacted me. Had I, as someone else to whom the church had suggested God was not really with me, found a similar solace as the women had? Could I identify people like me in the story? Could I point to any attributes of God I found helpfully rainbow? Given that the question was quite obvious, it troubled me that I wasn't quite sure how to begin to answer it.

The Bible makes quite explicit when it's talking about people who are women. Names and pronouns all speak to femaleness. There's no such explicit description of gayness in the story. To find gayness, you have to read in between lines - and when you do so, you find yourself wondering whether you're just projecting things onto the story. I read David's love for Jonathan as rainbow. Am I right? Some of the ways that Paul describes his anxieties, and some of the ways he talks about some of his friendships make better sense to me as I interpret him as a gay man. But neither David, Jonathan nor Paul give me much sense that my people are there greatly in the story of God being with us (because I don't know for sure that they are like me). Maybe **my** people **were** there, but were kind of straight-washed. I don't know. As for my comments in response to Maurice's question "do I see any rainbow characteristics in the Bible's description of God" (are my people reflected in the nature of God), I drew a blank - mainly because the scriptures don't tend to draw on the language of sexual orientation at all. I think the final version of Maurice's work will include a suggestion that rainbow people need to do a fresh reading of scripture, looking for descriptions of God to which we can say "yes, that's me". It's not that I feel God is foreign, or divorced from who I am. Like, we read that God is love, and occasionally (very occasionally) I do sometimes express love. We say that God is Creator, and sometimes I create. I can see parts of myself in the nature of God. It's just that one large facet of who I am still needs to find a mirror in the God in whose image I'm made.

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Maurice set the structure of today's sermon by asking marginalised people to explore whether they think God is with us - and whether seeing our own kind in the story and in the God is important in this. (Would it not be interesting to talk to refugees and slaves about how they see themselves represented in God's story? Or to the black people of apartheid era South Africa? Or to Palestinian Christians living in Gaza. Or to Dalits in India?)

Yet, more broadly, it also is, as Maurice argues in his introduction, a set of questions not just for the marginalised, but questions properly to be addressed to every human being. Whoever we are, and whatever we have heard from the world to the contrary, dare we believe that God is with us?

To Joseph (a heterosexual man), but (to his marginalisation credit) a poor one in an occupied country, comes the angelic message that while he may call his son "Jesus", "they" shall call him "Emmanuel", which means God with us. The incarnation, by which this wonderful new chapter of God's story shall begin, will be all about God being with us. Probably less to do with the location of God, as much as with the disposition of God towards the people with whom God will stand. God is with us.

To John the Divine, reflecting on the meaning of the life of Christ among the people, a vision comes of the new heaven and the new earth. It is from this vision that the text came that Christchurch's early Catholics inscribed over the portal of their cathedral. *Ecce tabernaculum Dei cum hominibus* - behold, the dwelling of God is with people. This new faith, from the cries from the manger in Bethlehem, to the restoring of creation at the end of time, is about God making a home around us. God with us - and our coming to understand that we too, are the "us" who are in the story.

What did Maurice say?

"Many people assume that whether God exists is the crucial matter . . . Most of us [though], need to live with creation, with other humans, animals, birds, insects, trees and plants etc. Some of us claim that the most important matter is God with us in our life with these our fellow creatures . . . All this raises the question whether the existence of God as a being apart is the crucial issue, and not rather a matter of corporate relationship . . . From the whole course of our lives, it is more appropriate that we know and affirm that God is with us.

Are people like us to be found in the story? Are the things that make us say "yes, we are made in that image" things that we can recognise? Is this not at the heart of a faith that calls itself incarnational? Is God a stranger - or is God with us?

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