

February 24, 2008

While visiting another Uniting Church in the past week, I noticed on the wall a small plaque which declared, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present".¹ I was immediately struck with a question – *is that true?* (You might like to answer that question yourselves quickly – with your "gut" response). In our reading from Exodus this morning the people ask the question, "Is the Lord with us, or not"? This may seem rather a silly question – certainly if we look back upon those stories as believers and so as those whose very being has been affected by a "yes" answer to that question: "Of course God was with them!" Yet while we may *look back* and affirm what the Scriptures already state for us, it is a different matter as we *live forward*. Is God with us, today, or not? And if he is, we might sometimes be moved to ask, "What on earth is he doing?"

When we ask a question about the whereabouts of God, of course, we are not asking whether he is here, or over there, as a table or a chair might be. Rather, we are asking, "Is God on our side? Is God *for* us or against us?" In our gospel reading this morning Jesus engages with a Samaritan woman – a heretic, as it were. Part of their discussion is where one ought to worship or, we might say, where God may be found. In a way similar to his response to Nicodemus in the gospel reading last week, Jesus points to the freedom of God not to be worshiped anywhere in particular, but wherever and however God wills. Whereas the Samaritan woman and (last week) the Jewish man Nicodemus both want to know (or presume to know) where God is, Jesus offers them no certainty of location at all. Whereas they both want to know that God *is* with them and for them as they currently are, Jesus denies them this knowledge.

When we ask questions like, "Where is God?" or, "Is God with us or not?", we mean more than simply to know the answer. We also

imply a link between where God is, and where are ourselves. Whether we count ourselves as believers or non-believers, we have an investment in the answer, for to know where God is is to know where we are – whether for better or for worse. We reckon ourselves as being in the right or in the wrong, according to where we think God is, or discover him to be. This being the case, we might note that we rarely desire to discover God in some place other than where we are. We will usually happily declare, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present". And we will usually mean by this, "God is *here*, and he is on our side".

But in relation to this let's take up a couple of thoughts we've heard this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans. If the "where" of God is an indicator of our own "where" and vice-versa, then there's not much to take comfort in in what we hear from Paul, for he speaks of the human being as being in weakness, as being in sin, and as being at enmity with God. On this account, the resounding response to the question of the Where of God must be, No, God is not with us; we do not have right on our side.

Yet Paul describes our situation so negatively, not because he is "down" on human possibility, but because he finds it extraordinary that, being such, we might *still* find that God *is* with us. That is, when we usually ask the question of God's presence, we ask in order to know whether or not *we* are right – whether or not we've earned God's favour or deserved his rejection. Paul says, instead, that what matters is what God will do with our failures. Or, more powerfully, what matters is what God *has done* with our failures. To ask whether God is with us or not is usually to ask whether God is *bound* to remain with us, or to leave us, according to our own goodness or achievement. Does not God *owe* us his presence? Is he not, bidden or unbidden, "there" for us?

Paul proclaims, instead, God's *freedom* – a freedom to act as he wills, and not according

¹ This was made popular by Carl Jung, who found it amount the writings of Erasmus, who in turn credited it as a Spartan proverb (Latin original: *Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit*).

to our standards of justice and right. Thus it is that Paul can declare, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Put differently, when God was most justified in *not* being present – at the rejection of Jesus – nevertheless he chose to be. This is the extraordinary heart of Christian confession: *God* is free. It has the corollary (consequence) that we also might be free. This might seem strange, for in this day we like to imagine that we are more freer than we've ever been. But true human freedom stems from God's freedom to set blinded, limited, enslaved people free – something which can be done only by exercising a sovereign freedom to deny the demands of justice and law. True freedom arises only when hearts and minds weighed down with the baggage of life are lifted, when God is not simply "there" as part of that baggage but present to remove it.

A God who is always present just because he is God – this is not a free God but sheer "there-ness", sheer existence. The best such a God can do is to secure only our own mere "there-ness" or existence – affirming what we are, whether that is good or bad. "Is God with us or not?" This is a question we can only answer in any way that makes a difference when we know that God is free *not* to be present, and yet *chooses* to be present. While we were yet opposed to God, God was "there", effecting our freedom: persisting despite resistance, laying a foundation for new, unimagined and quite unbelievable possibilities. It is not that God is "there" which matters, but whether God's being there will make a difference. In judgement of our failures, and in reconciling forgiveness, God is there to effect his purposes of life and love among us.

By the grace of this God may all his people find hearts and minds to perceive and act upon his healing presence, and give him due praise. Amen.