

JOHN 5:1-30  
WATCH! GOD IS PRESENT

“Spirituality” is a buzz word of the time, of the generation. People who are not sure about faith will talk about exploring their spirituality and that seems to open up all kinds of ways to go. I came across a definition of the word this week: “the sense of the presence of God and living in the light of that presence.” That set me thinking about the notion of the presence of God; where is God present? How does our Sunday worship reflect the claim that God is present here with us now? Is this something about which we say nothing and just assume that we understand it, or is it something that we need to affirm again and again? “Living in light of that presence”: after the service, we go out of here, energised to live for Jesus, inspired to be His people in the world, helped and equipped to live out our Christian faith when we go to work, when we meet people, in the day-to-day situations of our lives; or do we? Sometimes the people of God have left their ‘religion’ at the church door on the way out and have taken with them nothing of what they have heard and felt in worship; do we live in light of the presence of God, of the God we encounter here in worship?

There’s a fascinating dynamic at work in our society and culture at moment; there are all kinds of things working together that are hard to pin down. On the one hand, people are walking away from the Churches in droves: institutional religion of all kinds is struggling to survive. Some of that is supported by the secularists and atheists who want to take all religion out of public life and make it something that you practice on your own. Yet, at the same time, people are examining “spirituality” by the bucket load: go into any bookshop, or go online, and search for “spirituality” and more books than ever will be there. There are philosophies of life, other religious viewpoints, how to develop your personality – these books are not there except because people buy them; people are interested in these big questions of life, Christian faith included..

The Bible assumes that God is present and that God is at work. There are no arguments in the Bible for the existence or even the presence of God; the writers simply assume that God lives and that God is there. The living God, the Lord, is the One who gives life, who blesses, the One people should love and trust and is quite intolerant of the alternatives that people try out! God is at work; God is with His people. We see that sense of God present most keenly in Jesus; John has already said that Jesus is God made human for us and here we see that explained, or demonstrated in chapter 5! “Will the real Jesus please stand up?” Today, we take a step back from the story of the healing to the conversation that comes after it, to reflect on and consider what Jesus says and how He understands Himself and ask “how do we catch the sense of God present here, of God with us in our day-to-day life?”

*“I tell...” (John 5:19)* This is a huge claim for Jesus to make. Describing this Father-Son relationship He is obviously His relationship with God. It’s these pieces that challenge us to see just how big Jesus is, that He is not just a miracle-worker, not just the teacher, but is God in the world, the Son of the Father, God present in our midst in flesh and blood for a time. There are all kinds of ways to describe this Father-Son relationship in these verses: it is a co-operation, Father and Son working together, doing the same things; it is a relationship in which, somehow, the Son is dependent on the Father, not free to do His own thing, but looking to do what the Father wants; it is a relationship of mutual love, the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father; it is a relationship in which the Father has delegated some tasks and responsibilities to the Son; there is a trust between Father and Son. “The Father is God sending and commanding; the Son is God sent and obedient” (Barrett) – that

is maybe just a little too neat and tidy for me, but it gives something of the flavour of the way in which Jesus understands Himself – He is the Son of God in the world, God present in the world.

I was in a conversation a while back about Church with someone who has started coming back to church after a long time away; the last time he was in church was probably as a child. We were talking about the differences in Church here, now, from his previous experience and my friend said “You talk a lot more about Jesus; I grew up with the Church talking more about God!” It was a fascinating insight into a whole lot of things. People will talk about God as some mysterious being, difficult to define, as the source of their faith and bringing comfort, but talk about Jesus and faith – for some reason that’s too committed! But the Bible doesn’t give us that option of separation: the Father and the Son are so closely related that honouring one honours the other and neglecting one neglects the other. So faith in Jesus is faith in God and faith in God is found through Jesus.

The sense of the presence of God? The very essence of John’s gospel is that when people meet Jesus, they encounter the presence of God! Jesus is in Jerusalem again and near the city wall there is a pool where disabled people would gather. The pool has a reputation for healing water and it has something to do with the water being stirred and people are healed by going down into the pool just after the stirring! This man has been there for 38 years and has never been healed; he has never had anyone to help him in to the water and so when he meets Jesus there is a question to be asked: “*Do you...*” (*John 5:6*) That might seem an odd question: of course, he wants to get better, but “an eastern beggar often loses a good living by being cured.” (Finlay) The disabled man comes across as a bit grumpy and there is no notion of faith in this story here; he seems not even to know who it was who healed him. But, there, in the place where people in their deepest need gather and meet, there we see Jesus; God is present in a place of deepest need and His power and grace are at work. Jesus stands by the side of the pool in Jerusalem and we understand that God is there by the pool and works to heal.

How do we have this sense of God present with us? We say that God is present here as we meet for worship; we hope and pray for God’s presence to be sensed in our Church services, but how do we know that God is here? There is a group of songs in the Bible that are called travelling songs and Psalm 121 is both the first and best known of these travelling songs; they are “Songs of ascents” to give them their proper title, songs that we understand were used by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for some of the great feasts. Psalm 121 pictures the hills around the city and the pilgrim coming up against these hills and feeling the dangers that were to be encountered in these hills; they were a threat to his life. “*I lift...*” (*Psalm 121:1*) God is his help to cross these dangerous places, but at the end of the song he opens that sense of God’s presence out completely: “*the Lord...*” (*Psalm 121:8*) When Hebrew uses opposites, it is meant to include everything in between: “*your coming and going*” so when you come home at night God is with you; when you leave home in the morning God is with you and He is present every time in between; the whole of life is lived and God is with you.

That is a big statement to make. There is a little book called *The Practice of Presence of God* written by Brother Lawrence, seventeenth-century monk who spent his life working as a cobbler and in the monastery kitchens and he wrote this little book to encourage people to be aware that God is there even when washing the dishes! Do we expect to feel something different, warm, when we claim that God is present? Lots of people, especially in life’s darkest times, blame God for leaving them, for not being there when they needed Him most, for not answering our prayers.

By that we usually mean that circumstances seemed not to go our way and so we reason that God wasn't there at all; if He had been there, He would have surely made the bad things go away and because the bad things didn't go away as we had hoped, then surely God was not there. Let me paint that scenario in another way: God is always there; that's His promise and so it becomes our faith affirmation that God is there whether we feel Him there or not; God is there sharing our suffering, listening to our prayers and cries, and helping us in ways that we have not seen!

Here's a man who has been sitting by the side of the pool every day for 38 years. What happens? He's become almost invisible to everyone who walks round the colonnade. He's part of furniture and is almost invisible to the people around him; but not to Jesus. Jesus notices him; Jesus sees his need and offers to help him. "Do you..."; his reply is a complaint about how no-one helps him; no-one notices him. "Then Jesus..." (John 5:8f) Jesus noticed him and healed him in the same way that Jesus notices us and listens to our prayers. There are times when we feel invisible, as if no-one is taking any notice of us and our needs and feelings, but here is a picture of Jesus and His grace touching someone who was invisible. Jesus sees and knows us and is with us. There is a sense of the presence of God.

We have to live in the light of that presence: grace that the healed man experiences had to make a difference to his life – "Stop sinning!", "Be a changed man!" Do we leave our religion at the Church door on the way out? The presence of God is here, but what difference does that same presence of God make to our day-to-day life? Does "God with us" change the way we go to work? Or change the way we talk to our neighbours? Or change the way we relate to our family? Or change the way we handle the difficult things in life? Brother Lawrence washed the dishes to honour God because God was with him; he worked in the monastery garden to honour God because God was with him. God sees our coming and going and everything in between; He is with us in all of it. How do we live in the light of the presence of God? Do we live with a life shaped by the grace of God, being the kind of people Jesus wants us to be, shows us to be, and helps us to be.

"The sense of the presence of God and living in the light of that presence." There is nothing new in this. For generations, the Bible has been describing God present in the world. God is with us wherever go, in all of our circumstances, in the good days and bad days, in the days when we're aware of God and the days when we're not, in the days when we pray and the days when we don't, in the days when we feel weak and in need help and strength and the days when we don't see any kind of need. God is present in our world and in our lives; Jesus is at work in us by His grace and power; the Spirit is God in us. Do we live with that faith and hope in our hearts? Do we live as if God is with us? There are big things to think about here; nothing of this is easy to understand; but God is with us; takes notice of us, listens to our prayers and brings grace!