

## THE LOVING PRESENCE OF GOD

Nicky Ing - 4th September 2005

**Exodus 19: 16-24; Psalm 115: 1-10; Romans 13: 1-10; Matthew 18: 15-20**

Quite often, in the course of my work and ministry, I feel sad because I meet someone who has stopped going to church or praying, or reading their Bible, because of some loss or tragedy in their life for which they have felt God was to blame. They have been so badly hurt by the loss, that they can now only see God as an angry, punishing God, and their own lack of forgiveness has been projected onto the God who is no longer seen as forgiving or merciful. The crisis such people have been through has made them block themselves off from God's grace and forgiveness, and it is so sad when this happens, because the pain continues in their hearts, and cannot be healed. Only the power of God's love can overcome such pain, and somehow, we all need to be open to receive that love and forgiveness in our lives if we are to be made whole.

The readings this morning seem to me to have a common thread running through them...the thread being *the loving presence of God* at all times, and in all places, from age to age, in good times and in difficult times, with his people. Our first reading, from Exodus, speaks of the awesome power of God's presence, on Mount Sinai, as shown in the thunder, fire, earthquake and lightening...together with the sound of a trumpet '*so loud, that all the people who were in the camp, trembled*'..... God's presence is powerfully felt, but not seen, and a cloud covers the top of the mountain...this same cloud which appears at times, all through the journey the people of Israel make in the wilderness...the cloud which symbolizes the presence of God himself. It is the same cloud which covers Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration, again showing the presence of the glory and wonder of God, and the people cannot but respond with a sense of reverence and awe....I often think the thick mists we encounter here in Hilton in the summer months can be for us, a reminder of God's loving presence, which we can trust in even when it is difficult for us to find our way forward...we tend to forget in the dry season, how heavy the mist can be at times! So here in Exodus, we have the scene set for the giving of the law...the ten commandments which God gives to his people...the first four concerning the peoples' relationship to God, and the next six being about relationships with one another...(at a human level) **Love of God, and love of neighbour**, as finally given to us by Jesus (in Matthew 22: 37-40). So God is not seen...but the effects of God's power can be seen. Right now as we look around us at the spring green beginning to clothe the trees, and the new blossoms on our shrubs...we know that sap is rising in them...but we only see the effects of it. Just as blood flows through our bodies, keeping us alive...all that we see externally is the life that keeps us moving...and just as a kettle boils when we switch it on, so we know that electricity is circulating to create the heat, so these powerful elements work in a hidden way in order to do their creative work. All of these things are signs of God's presence, in our world.

The part of the psalm (115) that we read together, is yet another reminder of the presence of God, and of our need to trust God....vv. 8, 9, & 10...(*O Israel trust in the Lord: he is your help and shield....O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord: he is your help and shield...You that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord: He is your help and shield*).

Then in our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, in which Paul is telling people how they should behave, he is really echoing Jesus' commandment when he says that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves...love does not do evil to a neighbour, and so love is what fulfils the law....Paul is saying...don't owe anyone anything...except the debt of loving each other, because the person who loves the other has fulfilled the Law of God, and God is **always with us**, present and active through his Spirit, and in our lives, if we allow God to work through us.

Finally, our Gospel today speaks to us about how we try (and of course, we all often struggle to manage this one) how we try to live with one another's failures, and sinfulness....the disappointments we have at times with other people, the damage they can do to us....the pain, the hurts and the betrayals of trust. Perhaps it is good for us to remember that we all stand every day in need of the word of God's forgiveness....none of us is without faults, and we do need to bring them day after day before God to help us to deal with them. Whilst our relationship with God is personal to each one of us, it is never something private, because God calls us into communion with himself and also into communion with one another, whether we like it or not! When we are able to forgive one another, it does bring peace to our relationships. Any parent can talk about the injuries, the offences, the disobedience, the disappointments that they suffer in dealing with their children!! Without forgiveness, we just wouldn't be able to raise children at all! Neither can a marriage be sustained as steady and loving without mutual forgiveness....because the closer we are to one another, so much more do we have the power to hurt one another...and the emotional injuries we inflict can be very damaging without the mutual power of forgiveness.

The history of humankind is indeed, as much as anything, a history of war and conflict. From that and from what we see in the news every day, it seems that we humans have great difficulty in getting on with one another....whether it be in our local neighbourhood, or town, or city...or nation, or in the world. As Christians we can try to understand the negative side of community life, and confess it to God. But we cannot give in to it, when we see communities divided and people being isolated. Indeed, we can even do wrong to someone by doing or saying nothing when something does need to be said or done...Love should never be at the expense of truth...and that means that sometimes, unfortunately, confrontation can be unavoidable. But we need to know and understand that we need to try and walk our journey of faith in community with one another, needing to help and be helped, to offer support and to receive support, and both to challenge and receive challenge. So we need to be careful of being patronizing, or arrogant, which can be hurtful to other people. The Gospel also indicates that the way in which we relate to one another **in** the community of the Church should be rooted in prayer, in particular, communal prayer. ('**OUR** Father') When we come together as a community, as we do week by week, to pray with one another and to ask for direction, we

have the wonderful promise of Jesus, reflected here in our gospel today, that *he will be there among us*. If any group of us will gather, pray, work, and act with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we become so much **more** than the small group that we are...because Christ is present....As we pray together, we will learn to listen to God and also to listen to one another. Jesus says: *'if two of you agree on earth about anything that you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven'*. If we learn to listen to one another, we will find that God is also listening...that is because God's **presence** is with us....just as I said at the very beginning....this is the thread which joins all our scripture readings together today.

- We do gather in Jesus' name. We believe and trust that Jesus is a part of us and what we do. That is what we experience at the Eucharist...we in him and he in us. Through our common worship we can know the love of God in our lives and also the power of God moving among us. We certainly do need the discipline of Bible reading and private prayer in our individual lives...but we also need shared worship and connection with one another as we gather in Christ's name.
- We need to be praying for those Christians, who suffer on account of the hurts they endure at the hands of others who share the same faith. (*Important...*)
- We need to pray for families who are divided by tensions and misunderstanding, that they may learn to be tolerant and truthful with one another.
- We need to pray for those who maintain law and order, who often experience the anger and violence caused by others, that they may keep standards of patience and understanding and may receive God's protection in times of danger.
- We also need to pray for ourselves, that we may be forgiven for times when we hurt others, and that we may have the courage to forgive those who have hurt us...knowing that we all live in the gracious love and forgiveness of God.

I found a piece from the Inspirational writings of C. S. Lewis the other day, and I thought it expresses in a rather beautiful way something of the awakening experience of the ongoing presence of God in our lives. It is taken from an article in a publication called *Ministry and Liturgy*; (the article is on 'The challenge of Vocation').

C. S. Lewis puts it like this:

*When we die and finally see God, we will NOT say:  
"Lord, I could never have guessed how beautiful you are!  
We will not say that.  
Rather, we will say:  
"So, it was **you** all along.  
Everyone I ever loved, it was **you**.  
Everyone who ever loved me, it was **you**.  
Everything decent or fine that ever happened to me,*

*Everything that made me reach out and try to be better –  
It was **You**.....all along!”*