Challenge 33 of 40

Reflection by Nathan Brown - Melbourne, Australia

We are called to praise God for so many of His attributes—His love, His power, His holiness, His justice, His goodness, His transcendence—but, among this list of His praiseworthy virtues, we should not forget the with-ness of God. Of course, in a sense, His with-ness is an expression of His love and goodness but it demonstrates other of God’s characteristics, particularly His humility and His imminence.

But this isn’t just a nice idea or a pleasant Christmas sentiment. In the society and political culture in which we live, it is remarkable—and it should be jarring—to realise the degree to which Jesus identified with so much of human experience, particularly of those on the margins of our societies.

From asylum seeker (see Matthew 2:13–15) to atheist (see Matthew 27:46), from homeless guy and target of religious intolerance to member of an oppressed people group and victim of torture and monstrous injustice, the story of Jesus finds echoes in the worst and most challenging of both history and headlines. As “God with us,” Jesus identified with us in so many ways—many of them surprising and unexpected.

Jesus’ favorite description of Himself was the somewhat curious expression “Son of Man.” It is used about 80 times through the four gospels but only ever by Jesus—and only ever about Himself. Of course, there is a reference here to the expression used in the Book of
Daniel (see Daniel 7:13) but I think He was trying to make a point: Jesus so identifies with us—and not only with us but also with “those” other people—that His story has so many echoes with the experiences of oppressed and marginalised people. The miracle of His incarnation catalyses all our relationships and our call to love others, even—perhaps especially—amid the headlines, politics and injustices of our time and place.

“God with us” is a wonderful and comforting truth but the risk comes with how we define—and limit—that “us.” Our temptation is that “us” is about the people like us or even only the people we like. But it must also include those we don’t like, who make us uncomfortable or even afraid. To a degree—perhaps as an interim step—it might be useful to re-frame this beautiful truth as “God with them.” For those of us who need reminding, this offers us glimpses of what it can mean to be marginalised and allows us to admire the with-ness of God from a fresh perspective.

From this vantage point, caring for and serving the world and those around us is one way to experience the reality of “God with us” (see Matthew 25:31–46). Musician and activist Bono put it like this: “God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunities and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.”* Somehow in working with and for those most in need, many people have found themselves working with God—always remembering that He was there first.

Then we can recall that God is also, always and still with us, and our understanding of “us” suddenly expands in dramatic and transformative ways. This really changes the world and how we look at it and respond to it. The political issues, headline tragedies and humanitarian causes in our world are about people—whom God is with. Because of Jesus and our following of this “Son of Man,” these God-withed people demand our compassionate response.

We cannot praise God for His with-ness without being drawn into with-ness with other people. Perhaps this is another way of phrasing Jesus’ summary of the twinned commands to “Love God” and “Love our neighbors as ourselves” (see Matthew 22:36–40). As those who recognise and celebrate the with-ness of God, we are people whose world is transformed and who change the world for and with others.


Recalibrate

1) How does it change your understanding and experience of “God with us” to re-phrase it as “God with them”?
2) How can you demonstrate the reality of God's with-ness in your church and community?