

God amongst us? Really?

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-17 & John 1: 1-18

If you have ever read the book of Jeremiah you will know it is a pretty depressing book. Jeremiah has been chosen by God to proclaim the truth at a very unpleasant time in Judah's history. The kingdom of Judah believed that they were God's chosen people. God was with them and they would always be successful and prosperous. This belief was based on two things. First that they would always be ruled by a king descended from David, and that they would always dwell in the land of Israel. But at this stage in the kingdom's history it is obvious that the kings will not last as the nation will be conquered by a stronger nation, Babylon, and that the population will be taken into exile in Babylon.

The kingdom could do with some good news, some assurance that God is still with them, but Jeremiah insists on proclaiming that the kingdom has disobeyed God and so will be conquered and the people taken into exile. Understandably Jeremiah is unpopular for saying this. At one point he is placed at the bottom of a well and left there. Fortunately he is rescued and survives. Finally he is taken to Egypt with a group who escape there in order to avoid being taken away by the conquerors.

The kingdom must have felt that God had abandoned them and was no longer with them. Maybe Jeremiah felt this way too. Is God still amongst them, even though the people feel that God is not with them?

One of the books I read described this as a time of "the deadliness of exile". It went on to say that our other passage this morning reminds us that Jesus was born in a time of "the deadliness of exile" as the nation was under Roman rule and Herod's cruelty was being experienced by the nation. At this time God chose to show the nation that He was amongst them.

Our question this morning is whether God is amongst us. Sometimes it feels as if God has abandoned us. There are passages in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, where it appears as if God has left His people. I think especially of Psalm 22 which Jesus quoted on the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There are times in my own life where I wonder if my own belief in God is founded on reality. Some things that help me at those times are that I have enough evidence that God exists and that He is a good God who loves me. A quote that helps me at these times is that "doubt is different from unbelief". I experience doubt, but not unbelief.

I have spoken of a personal experience of asking "Is God with me?" But our question this morning is "God amongst us?" Although this question has a personal component, it mainly applies to groups. Churches and even nations can lose hope and feel despair. I don't mean to be political, even about another nation, but I wonder if some citizens of the USA feel as if God has abandoned them at the moment.

Incidentally, if I am feeling as if God is not there, being part of a good group that has strong awareness that God is amongst them helps enormously. In my experience Holy Trinity Richmond is such a group. I am very grateful to you all for that.

Returning to the story of Jeremiah, God had not abandoned the kingdom or Jeremiah. He wants the people to learn something from being in exile. Exile is a last resort as He has tried other ways to teach the people, but without result.

In contrast to the rest of the book, the passage Alison read to us this morning is joyful and comforting. God wants the people to know that He has not abandoned them. He is still amongst them. They will return from exile and inhabit their land again.

The passage begins with a command to rejoice. Behave as if God is amongst you.

It continues with the reasons for rejoicing. The people will return from exile. The return itself won't be a difficult journey as the path will be smooth and even the most vulnerable will be safe; the blind, the lame and the pregnant women. For various reasons there will be sadness as they return. Perhaps because they some of the people they had hoped would return with them will not do so.

But God will turn the sadness into joy when they are back in their own land. Young people will dance with joy, old people will be happy, and priests will become fat with the bounty the Lord has provided.

Jeremiah tells the people this before the exile begins because knowing this will help them survive the exile. Is God amongst them in their difficulties? YES. Is God amongst us? YES.

I would like to end with an appropriate prayer I found in my devotions book yesterday morning.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God, creator of all;
To you be glory and praise forever!
As we rejoice in the gift of your presence among us,
let the light of your love always shine in our hearts
and your praise be ever on our lips.
Amen.