

Among us*John 1:1-18*

At the beginning of a New Year, with so many hopes and fears, perhaps more this year than for any other in living memory, it feels to me that to gather in worship, even online, will make a difference. Though it is not how we would have wanted to start 2021, we make the best of it that we can. A friend and colleague, Sam Wells, wrote a few days ago, "Adversity is when we show our true colours."ⁱ Last year was one where all of us, in some way or another, had to show our true colours as we soldiered on through 2020.

But now, 2021, a New Year. May it be for us that the decisions we make about our lives, and how we choose to live them, will be guided by our hopes rather than our fears.

Which may be easier said than done.

Some years ago, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey (with the bristling eyebrows) wrote to the clergy under his care. He offered them 'Five Helps for a New Year'.

1. *Thank God. Often and always.*
2. *Take care to confess your sins.*
3. *Be ready to accept humiliations. They hurt but they help keep you humble.*
4. *Don't worry about status.*
5. *Laugh at things, absurdities, yourself.*

I think those might work not just for ministers and priests, but for everyone. I particularly like the first one: 'Thank God. Often and always.' Because God is present. Among us.

In a year like last year, when many were more aware of absence rather than presence, of people, of dreams, of vision, of hope, never before was it more necessary for those who share the Christian faith to focus as best they could on the presence of God, and not what sometimes felt like God's absence. In a year that felt like endless Good Fridays, with God gone, we came, at last, to Christmas, and to this New Year, to be confronted again by one of the great truths of our faith. That somehow, for us, beside us, despite us, because of us, God in the person of Jesus is still with us, always with us. God is among us.

In that shining passage at the beginning of John's Gospel that is what we have heard. "...*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.*"

We read and hear it nearly every year, and yet still it comes as a surprise. God, in the form of a helpless infant, comes to earth, to live among us, to grow up among us, to share with us, to teach us, to heal us, to help us, to live and die for us, to rise again for us, to save us, and to love us. In first century Palestine, in twenty-first century Scotland. "We don't read stories in the Bible looking for beliefs. We read them for *meaning*."ii Might it be the case that what gives us meaning at this juncture in the world's history is the reassurance that we are not alone; that God surprises us, again and again, by being among us?

It has been said that alongside COVID19 there is another pandemic at work in our world. It is the pandemic of loneliness. It is not a new pandemic, for it has been with us for many years. As I reflected back over the last nine months, and the impact they have had on this congregation and our Church, it has struck me again and again that what so many have been missing has been our gathering together. For worship, for coffee, for meetings, for singing, and for so much more. Those times, the 'soft' side of the Church, when by being together we have turned a building of stone and wood and metal into a living body. A body that embraces and laughs; a body that weeps and sings; a body that welcomes and includes; a body that needs patching up and needing to move on. A body that is sometimes so familiar to us, and yet a body that can sometimes surprise us. The faith that we live out loud is sometimes so very familiar, with words and ideas and actions that seem like part of our DNA. Yet at times the surprise of what we actually believe, and what it impels us to do and to be pops out, and takes our breath away.

When Jesus is among us, both familiar and surprising, reassuring and challenging, keeping us safe and making us confront danger, then our faith is real, and alive. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, suddenly His hand upon our shoulder, making us gasp with surprise and recognition at the same time. It might not happen often, but when it does, it stops us in our tracks. It makes us so grateful to the God Who is among us, reminding us when we need to be reminded most, that

we are not alone. There is help, and the time will come when one day will not blend greyly into another, and that much that we have missed will be restored. Not in the same way necessarily, but in a way that will give our lives the texture and colour and purpose that so many of us have missed over these last months. The Jesus Who is among us, reaching out, a hand on our shoulder, stopping us in our tracks, and making us gasp with recognition, and surprise.

Quinn Caldwell, a minister in the United Church of Christ in America, writes:

“At the very end of the musical Hamilton, the newly deceased Eliza Hamilton, having been reunited with her son and husband, faces the audience. Her eyes grow wide, she gasps loudly in delight, and the house goes dark. Curtain.

Much has been made of that gasp, especially in the days since those of us who couldn’t afford to see the show in person watched it streaming online. What did she see, or understand? Was it God? Did she break the fourth wall and see the audience sitting there and realize the work she’d done to preserve her husband’s legacy had come to new fruition? Something else? The producer’s not telling, and of course that’s part of the point.

There’s a line in the modern American Lutheran hymn, “I Was There to Hear Your Boring Cry”, that is very powerful. At the end, after the hymn has taken us through a human lifetime marked by God’s constant presence, it says,

*“As the evening gently closes in
and you shut your weary eyes,
I’ll be there as I have always been,
with just one more surprise.”*

*To think that no matter what I’ve done or haven’t, no matter what I’ve learned or failed to learn or forgotten, no matter what I’ve lived through and no matter what finally kills me, still there will be one last new thing: that whether it comes when I’m old and ready or young and unwilling, at the last my eyes will widen in delight...I long for it. Not for death, mind you. For the **surprise.**”*

At the doorway of this New Year, with our largely empty diaries, and with all the uncertainty that these next months will still bring, remember that Jesus is among us, still. Jesus is ready to surprise

us yet again with His presence, with His love, and with His ideas for our future. Together. With Him. Surprise!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Sam Wells, St Martin in the Fields Newsletter, 31/12/20

ⁱⁱ Brian D McLaren, The Great Spiritual Migration, p28