

Where God stays

II Samuel 7:1-14a; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Have you ever wondered what heaven will be like? A silver-sanded beach on a sunny day, with not too many people around, and the aquamarine waves gently lapping at the shore? A summer garden in full bloom, the scent of roses, the colour of a herbaceous border, a brilliantly green-striped lawn? A cosy room with a log fire on a cold winter's day, with a good book, a welcoming sofa, and a glass of something good to drink? A crisp, well-ironed set of bed linen covering a comfortable bed as you lie still for that first moment with the covers over you? A family or friends gathering with all the ones you love best of all around you, happily chatting, and the sound of laughter like music to your ears? A long view towards a distant horizon from a hilltop? A piece of music, familiar or new, that catches you, stops you in your tracks, and lifts you up higher and higher? The singing of hymns? The times of silence?

The C19th Anglican priest and wit, Sydney Smith, said, "My idea of heaven is eating pâté de foie gras to the sound of trumpets."

Heaven. The place where God stays. Blue skies, fluffy white clouds, golden stairways, angels and harps. Or cathedrals and churches. Large, hushed gothic spaces, with carved wood and stained glass. Or in the case of our Old Testament reading, the Temple that David promised to build in Jerusalem for God. As much a piece of self-serving legitimation as it was a genuine act of piety. David, a relatively new king, from a lowly background, still needing to prove that he had the trappings of kingship and the bigger vision people expected, making a major statement by building something grand and imposing for the God he worshipped. David, the shepherd-boy, writing heart-wrenching songs about hope and loss and fear and betrayal that we know as the psalms.

These verses from our Old Testament reading reflect what must have been an honest dispute in Israel concerning the tension between God's freedom and God's presence. The temple guarantees God's presence, but at the same time militates against God's freedom. The old Ark of the

Covenant was a box, carried around on poles, emphasising God's freedom and mobility. A temple removes the possibility and danger that God might depart.

Where does God stay? The problem with David's thinking, and the thinking of many religious people since that time, is that God can be contained and controlled. God will not be held in place by any religious arrangement. No matter how plush the surroundings, God will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by luxury. God is free and continues to be free. God goes where God chooses. Perhaps even more accurate is God goes where God is needed, and God goes where, sometimes, we least expect, or want, God to be.

Where does God stay? In a stable in Bethlehem, for a while. On the road as a refugee from persecution, for a while. In a town house, for a while. In a lonely, deserted place, for a while. With the sick, and untouchable people on the streets, for a while. In an upper room, for a while. On a cross, for a while. In a tomb, for a while. In an early morning garden, for a while.

God stays in places where people need to meet God. For healing, and hope; for teaching and correction; for affirmation and challenge. For an answer that says no, or yes.

God may be in different spaces and places, but I think God stays more with people.

God is staying with the people coming to terms from the devastating floods in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. God did not cause the floods, but stays with those made homeless, those bereaved, those bringing help.

God is staying with people who will be affected by the vote in the UK Parliament where a relatively narrow majority voted to reduce promised UK aid to the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. An action rightly called by many, in my opinion, as a moral failure. The reduction amounts to around £4billion. It was contrary to the manifesto commitments of every major political party in 2019. It will impact poorer nations who struggle even more than we do against the Covid-19 pandemic, and who are also struggling to provide access to basic healthcare, sanitation and vaccinations, as well as clean water. God is certainly staying with the churches, charities and individuals who have committed to continue support and care to the poorest and the most vulnerable people in our world.

God is staying in the hospital wards and homes in our country, where women and men are waiting for operations and health care; who are battling life-threatening disease; who are coming to the end of their lives.

God is staying with the young people who wonder and worry about what their future will hold for them when the pandemic eventually recedes.

God is staying with the refugees in our world, fleeing persecution, famine and drought, and being denied hope and security by many countries who could do more.

God is staying with our health workers and social carers, exhausted by this last year, and with so many other workers fearful for their jobs, weary of home-working, desperate for breaks but not sure when rest will come.

God is staying with every forgotten person in every forgotten story where justice has been denied, promised help as vanished or never came, news interest has moved on, and public memory has faded. Every story that filled our headlines and our hearts, but overtaken, or squeezed out, or set aside. God stays there.

God is staying with the people of the Church, in faith communities that ache to fulfil their desire to help and serve, to worship in familiar and unfamiliar ways, to see what shape the Church will assume in the days ahead, but stuck, like so many, in the no-man's-land of waiting and frustration.

God is staying right here in this place at this moment. Ignoring every social distancing regulation, by getting up right close and personal to you, if you're joyful and hopeful and happy; or with you if you are nursing some hidden illness, or old grief, or private grievance, or unanswerable concern.

In these last months I have lost count how many times sermons have been preached on variations on the theme of the word, 'with'. The Immanuel God. The God beside us. The God Who journeys with us. The God Who shows compassion toward us. The God Who stays *with* us. God stays with the people who are one natural disaster away from homelessness and hunger; one financial crisis away from economic ruin; one wrong decision away from the loss of family, respect, a job, a future. Not a magical God Who prevents the evils happening; God does not work that way. But

the God Who stays with those who suffer, and inspires others to help when they can, as much as they can, wherever they can.

In a world where people have free choice, because we are not robots, God invites and inspires us to work alongside God to repair the brokenness and the hurt wherever it happens. God does not compel compassion; God calls compassion from us as we respond to the needs we see.

Where does God stay? With the hurt and the healers; with the lost and the finders; with the ignored and the ones who notice; with the unloved, and the loving. God stays right there. Always.

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

Amen