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# THE FURROW

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Lawrence Pang

God *Is* With Us

# God Is With Us

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In 2003, *The Furrow* published Father Thomas O'Connor's homily about how the Christian belief that God is with us has been challenged by 'hard evidence'.<sup>1</sup> He cites as examples the "alcohol-lubricated violence at home and in the streets", abandonment of the family, desolation in times of personal struggles, environmental crisis, moral decadence, sexual scandals in the Church, dwindling attendance at Mass and confession and particularly the declining social status of the Church in contemporary Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years later, not only is there no sign of improvement, the situation seems to have deteriorated further. Almost half a million people have perished in the Syrian war.<sup>3</sup> Mass shootings in the United States continue with undiminished force and have claimed an increasing number of innocent lives.<sup>4</sup> Climate change is affecting everyone, particularly the people living in the poorest regions of the world. In the words of Pope Francis, Mother Earth "cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."<sup>5</sup> On another front, the traditional family is under attack. In 2015, Ireland decided in a referendum that 'marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex.'<sup>6</sup> In November 2017, Australia also voted in favour of same-sex marriage in a plebiscite.<sup>7</sup> The sex scandals facing the Australian Church have also intensified. Confronted with these

1 Thomas O'Connor, "God with Us," *The Furrow* vol. 54, no. 1 (2003): 15-18, p15.

2 *Ibid.*, 15-16.

3 Al Jazeera Media Network, "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>.

4 Gun Violence Archive, "Gun Violence Archive 2018," <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

5 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 2.

6 Department of Justice and Equality, "Government Announces Wording for Marriage Equality Referendum," <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR15000009>.

7 Mary Anne Neilsen, "Same-Sex Marriage," Parliament of Australia, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BriefingBook45p/SameSexMarriage](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook45p/SameSexMarriage).

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scenarios, ‘we could be excused for thinking that God, if he hasn’t abandoned us, has at least made himself scarce.’<sup>8</sup>

### BLEAK YET HOPEFUL

As the Church grapples with the appalling situations around the world and struggles to maintain its foothold in the contemporary world, the psalmist’s lament to God comes immediately to mind (Ps 44:24): “Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” We could relate this sense of abandonment to Jesus’ assurance in his commission to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age.” (Mt 28:18b-20).<sup>9</sup> Based on dwindling Church attendance, people appear doubtful about the presence of Christ in the Church. Compounding this issue is that making disciples has become progressively challenging in an increasingly secular world. The situation is indeed bleak, but we must not break down in despair. As Father O’Connor urges, we must continue to discern the feeling of divine abandonment and listen to ‘God’s Holy Spirit whispering to our hearts ... trying to tell us that just because we feel God is absent doesn’t mean he’s not there.’<sup>10</sup> Returning to Matthew’s Gospel, it is theologically significant that of the Synoptic Gospels, only the Matthean Jesus does not ascend to heaven.<sup>11</sup> Jesus’ promise of his abiding presence as God with us has a strong foundation in the Old Testament. God – from time immemorial – has always been with his people and this idea must be brought into sharp focus to counter the perception that God is no longer in our midst.

### OLD TESTAMENT FOUNDATION FOR THE EVER-PRESENT GOD

In Genesis, God expels the man and woman from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:22-24) – from his presence – for disobeying the divine command to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). However, when the woman became pregnant with the man’s son, *outside* the Garden, she exclaims, ‘I have produced a man with the help of God’ (Gen 4:1). Thus, God was with them even though he had banished them from the Garden. Cain, the son, also sinned against God albeit for a different offence (Gen 4:8). God’s question to Cain ‘Where is your brother Abel?’

8 O’Connor, “God with Us,” 15.

9 Italics are for emphasis.

10 O’Connor, “God with Us,” 15-16.

11 M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 8:504.

is an opportunity for him to confess his crime and repent (Gen 4:9; cf. Gen 3:11). Defiantly, Cain claims that he is not responsible for Abel's wellbeing and, indignantly, complains that the resultant punishment of banishment from God's presence was too harsh.<sup>12</sup> Just like God's graceful response to the man and woman's disobedience before he sends them out of the Garden (Gen 3:21), God puts a mark on Cain (Gen 4:15). It was not a mere symbol. It is God's signature at the bottom of a contract, so to speak, that guarantees God's protection for Cain if harm comes his way (Gen 4:15). Though Cain may feel God's absence in his life, God is ever ready to make his presence felt when needed.

In the account of the Great Flood, God protects Noah and his family from annihilation by the flood water (Gen 7:23) so that God could recreate humanity, but sadly, the new human communities sin against God in the land of Shinar yet again (Gen 11:1-7). After scattering them across the face of the earth (Gen 11:8-9), God calls Abraham to be his instrument of blessings to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3). In other words, God still desires to be present to the world, through Abraham, despite its propensity to cause God to grieve (Gen 7:5-6).

The Old Testament also provides many other narratives that show God's active involvement in the world as the Lord of History, frequently working through human agents to reinforce the sense of divine presence. With God's help, Moses and Aaron were able to provide for the people's needs during their trek through the wilderness despite their rebelliousness (e.g. Ex 17:1-7; Num 16:46-47). God was on Joshua's side in the capture of the Promised land (Jos 3:7) after the people's blatant refusal to take control of it about forty years earlier (Num 14:1-4). During the period of settlement in the land, God raised judges to deal with Israel's enemies (Judg 2:11-23).<sup>13</sup> When kings stood between God and the people's fidelity during the monarchical period, God, through the prophets, continued to reach out to them. When the people rejected the warnings of the prophets and were exiled (2 Kings 17:5-20; 2 Kings 25:1-21), God was still watching over them to bring them back to their homeland (Isaiah 40:1-5).

In addition to narrative testimonies, a clear pattern of textual evidence reinforces the idea that God was always with his people. When the land of Canaan experiences famine, God appears

<sup>12</sup> It is proposed that Cain's question not be viewed as sarcastic or rhetorical. Textual evidence suggests that Cain's question is genuine in that the narrative indicates that the work of guarding/keeping is not applicable outside the garden of Eden. Kristin M Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4: 1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3," *Interpretation* 60, no. 4 (2006): 377-78.

<sup>13</sup> God's presence is also mediated through non-human agency e.g. angels (Gen 21:17; Ex 3:2; 33:2), cloud and fire (Ex 13:21; contra. 1 Kgs 19:12); thunder (Ex 19:19).

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to Isaac and tells him not to go to Egypt, but to stay in Gerar. God assures him, ‘I will be with you’ אֲנִי אֶעֱמָד אִתְּךָ (Gen 26:3). When tension arises between Jacob and Laban, God instructs Jacob to return to Beer-sheba with the assurance, ‘I will be with you’ (Gen 31:3) just as God had pledged to do (Genesis 28:15). In his final words to Joseph sometime before his death, Jacob assures him that ‘God will be with you’ and will bring him back to Canaan (Gen 48:21), which Moses fulfilled some years after Joseph’s death (Ex 13:19). When Moses expresses incompetence in response to God’s commission to deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian oppression, God assures him “I will be with you” (Ex 3:12). Indeed, God was with him and the Israelites during their demanding trek to the Promised land. However, when the reality of hardship sets in, doubt in God’s presence arises (Ex 17:7): “Is the Lord among us or not?” When Moses appoints Joshua as his successor to lead the people into the Promised land, he speaks with him as a prophet. Moses encourages him to be strong and bold because God will be with him and will not fail him or forsake him (Deut 31:8b). Before the successful crossing of the Jordan and capture of Jericho, God promises Joshua of his abiding divine presence (Josh 3:7): “I will be with you as I was with Moses.” When King David speaks with Solomon concerning the building of God’s temple, he assures him with Moses’ words to Joshua: “Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed; for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the Lord is finished” (1 Chr 28:20). These and many other assurances of the abiding presence of God (2 Sam 15:35; 1 Kings 11:38; 2 Chr 20:17; Isa 8:10; 43:2; Amos 5:14), given directly by God or through human agents, bear strong scriptural witness to the divine affection for God’s people.

### GOD IS WITH US IN JESUS

The Old Testament witness to God’s abiding presence helps us to understand the import of Jesus’ assurance at the end of Matthew’s Gospel – ‘I am with you’ (Mt 28:20b).<sup>14</sup> We should not be surprised by the adverb ‘always’ that modifies Jesus’ parting words ‘I am with you’ (Mt 22:20b) for God was always with his people and he *will always be with us*, and will not forsake us until he has accomplished all the work of salvation. Jesus’ assurance is astounding from another literary perspective. It harks back to the beginning of the Gospel and the quotation (Mt 1:23) from Isaiah 7:14, particularly the name “Emmanuel”, which is the English translation of the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים אִתָּנוּ ‘God (is) with us’. Just as the son to be born was a sign of abiding divine presence for the people of Isaiah’s time,

<sup>14</sup> Only Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus’ assurance “I am with you”.

so is the child to be born to Mary and Joseph the manifestation of the living God to the Jews of first-century Palestine and the people of God of all ages from henceforth (Mt 28:19-20). Thus, “God (is) with us” (Mt 1:13) and “I am with you” (Mt 22:20b) frame and highlight the Matthean Jesus as God *in* human history.

#### GOD HAS NOT ABANDONED US

On the issue of environmental and moral decadence in the world, scripture gives us pause for thought. There are descriptions of God’s attempts to intervene in problems arising from human indiscretion at critical junctures in history. The Great Flood is a prime example.<sup>15</sup> Despite the cataclysmic proportion of that event, God does not seek to utterly destroy his creation (Gen 6:5-7, 11-13). Instead, it is a step in the direction of re-creation as the sole initiative of God:

No matter how drastic human sin becomes, destroying what God has made good and bringing the world to the brink of uncreation, God’s grace never fails to deliver humankind from the consequences of their sin. Even when humanity responds to a fresh start with the old pattern of sin, God’s commitment to his world stands firm, and sinful humans experience the favour of God as well as his righteous judgement.<sup>16</sup>

The adverse events in our time are alarming. They should jolt us to ponder in our hearts just ‘how weak even the best of us are and how much we need the support of the Spirit ... All the ugliness is a reality check, the opportunity to recognize and admit failure and the occasion to start again, armed with God’s forgiveness and his Spirit. This isn’t a time of desolation.’<sup>17</sup> God has not abandoned us despite negative experiences seeking to convince us that God has left us to our own devices. Through prayer and contemplation, we can hear the voice of God deep in our being urging us to trust him with all our heart, and not to rely on our human perception (Prov 3:5). The voice calls us to look at the whole of creation with God’s breadth and depth, to hear it crying out to us to act in concrete ways to re-direct the path of self-destruction to healing and new life. For this, we must encourage one another to trust that God *is* with us.

15 Two other major events concern the destruction of Israel and Judah in 722 and 587 BCE respectively. They are God’s attempts to correct the religious decline that has overtaken the northern and southern kingdoms (2 Kgs 17:1-20; 25:1-21; Hos 1:10-11; 3:1-5; Jer 30:1-3; 31:31-34). Episodes of divine intervention include Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-33.

16 David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Sheffield, Eng.: University of Sheffield, 1978), 83.

17 O’Connor, “God with Us,” 16, 17.