

## **“Is the Lord with us or not?”**

*The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites complained and put the Lord to the test when they asked, “Is the Lord with us or not?” Exodus 17:7 (Good News translation)*

The closing words of today’s first reading from the Book of Exodus pose a question which has run through every century and is still very much around today: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”**

It’s a question that is asked over and over again in the Bible. When the rains fail and there’s not enough water: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”** When there’s too much water and Noah is building his ark: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”** When God’s people are hemmed in by their enemies: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”** When there’s nothing but manna to eat in the Promised Land: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”**

Every time calamity and disaster strike, people ask: “Does God exist?” “Is God awake or sleeping?” “Has God abandoned us?” “Is God dead?” **“Is the Lord with us or not?”**

Fast forward from Biblical times to today. As the flames engulfed Grenfell Tower: **“Was the Lord with us or not?”** As hurricanes swept America and the Caribbean: **“Was the Lord with us or not?”** As the earthquake struck Mexico: **“Was the Lord with us or not?”** As thousands flee Myanmar: **“Is the Lord with us or not?”**

The Book of Exodus may be ancient, but the question it raises is very contemporary. And it’s a question that I wish religious people asked more often because, in my experience, it’s much easier to **“do religion”** than it is to have faith. Let’s face it, you don’t need faith to come to Church when life is going well and all your plans are going along nicely. But, when the going gets tough, and things collapse around you, by God you need faith then. When your relationships break down, and you hurt to the core, that’s when faith kicks in. And when you can’t control what is happening within or around you, that’s when you find out how little or how much faith you have.

And at such times it is the strong, not the weak, the courageous, not the timid, the true believer, not the atheist, who has the guts to ask: **“Is God still with me or not?” “Is God still among us or not?”**

That question really came home to me some years ago when I was working in London with people with AIDS.

One night I was called to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital to visit John, a Ugandan man and father of five, who was dying. John had stood up to Idi Amin’s dictatorship and had been imprisoned. Sadly, one of the most common punishments for political dissidents at the time was to forcibly inject them with the HIV virus. It was a particularly barbaric form of genocide. By some miracle John had escaped and found asylum in London.

I had been visiting John and his family for about a year at their home in Battersea when I got the call to the hospital and had got to know them well. Arriving at the hospital, I did what I always did, and popped into the chapel to ask God to give me the strength I would need to be there for John and to be able to comfort his family. I knew the chapel well and had spent a lot of time there over the years. It was right bang in the middle of the hospital, and its most striking feature was a floor-to-ceiling painting of Jesus risen from the dead by the Italian artist Paolo Veronese. If you look it up on Google you will find a very confident depiction of a triumphant Christ conquering death and bringing light out of the most awful darkness.



It was an image which really spoke to me every time I saw it; an image that supported me and from which I drew strength for my role as chaplain to the dying. But this night – when I opened the chapel door – it was gone. And the wall was empty. And I found myself staring at a blank – empty space – with nothing to comfort me, nothing to reassure me, nothing to tell me that God was still among us.

I had come looking for a sign of God's presence, but all I found was confirmation of God's absence. I had come looking for reassurance, but all I found was emptiness. (It turned out that the painting was on loan to an exhibition)

But that coming face to face with the absence of God was the most profound spiritual moment of my life, and set me thinking for months afterwards: If it was up to me, what would I put in that chapel, what would I place on that empty wall, that could speak to the wounded, hurting, bewildered relatives and patients who, like me, might pop into that chapel to draw breath or seek reassurance or give hope in a hospital that knew so much about suffering and pain.?

That all happened a long time ago, but the experience taught me **not** to look for resurrection in church or in religion but in people, in people like John, who refused to hate his oppressors, and in people who refuse to let death have the last word.

That experience taught me to look for the presence of God, not in priests and bishops and church meetings but in the people who run towards human suffering and atrocities – not away from them – in people who do whatever they can to help others rise up again after a fall.

But, above all, that experience taught me that God turns up and shows his face among us every time someone gets up after a sleepless night, a depression, a setback, and, putting one foot in front of the other, faces a new day with courage, when they could so easily have given up and rolled the stone securely over their own premature tomb.

And so for me the question is no longer “Is God still with us or not?” but “**Are we still with God?**”, or have we who call ourselves believers abandoned faith for its poor substitute, religion?”

Amen.

Rev Dr Michael Paterson  
Preached at St Margaret's, Rosyth, on Sunday 1 October 2017