

4th Sunday of Advent (A)
Isaiah 7:10-14 / Matthew 1:18-24
22.12.2013

Many people ask the question: *Where is God?*
They sometimes phrase that question in a way which honestly asks if God even exists.
They will say: *If God exists where is He to be found?*

The question *where is God to be found* is not a new one.
It has always been there.
The search for God is an age old quest.

If we are still asking today *where is God to be found* the reason is simple: we just don't *get* the answer!

Understand me.

I am not saying that the answer has not been given to us.

It has been given to us: we just don't *get* it!

We just don't *get* it not because the answer is a very complicated one, but because it is so simple.
You see, by and large, we are people who are greatly complicated, lacking in simple trust.

The word addressed to us this Sunday, both through the prophet Isaiah and the gospel passage from Matthew's Infancy narrative, affirms that *God-is-with-us*.

This is where God is: *with us!*

I would like to take this affirmation *God-is-with-us* along with the final word of today's gospel passage in which we are told *Joseph took Mary home as his wife*.

Joseph took Mary home as his wife having been told that he was to call the child born of her, *Emmanuel*, a name meaning, *God-is-with-us*,

I see this indication of Joseph having taken Mary (and the child she bore in her womb) *home* as a reminder of one of the privileged places of meeting with the Lord, one of the privileged ways for us to experience the truth of the affirmation that *God-is-with-us*.

Is it not implied here that *God-is-with-us* in our homes: that's to say, in our love relationships, in our families, in our communities of life?

Yes, *God-is-with-us* in all the loving relationships that constitute and are part of our lives.

In a privileged way it is here that we experience God's presence in our lives.

God comes to us through others!

This was brought home to me recently.

Let me tell you how.

A person of what might be called a loosely Christian faith background who is married to a non-Christian husband and who is living in a largely non-Christian, secular environment wrote some lines to me the other day that really struck me.

In response to a very simple message of good wishes I had sent her by text she replied: *Thank you for your thoughts and prayers. They are very much appreciated. It is strange but I feel quite alone, disconnected from God, but the prayer of others for me touches me a lot and gives me hope.*

She went on to make what I consider to be a profound affirmation of our Christian faith in the incarnation when she added this line to her message: *God understood that in order to reach us He had to come to us in humanity.*

Even though in sending my simple text I had not set out to enter into a faith dialogue with this person I found myself obliged to reply to her remark with these words: *You have understood things well. God comes to us in the incarnation.*

I went on in a second text to allude to a member of her family circle who is well-known to me who she knows loves her and cares for her. I assured her that I knew that this person prayed for her a lot. I didn't say it that God came to her and reached out to her through this person who loves and cares for her because it wouldn't have been appropriate for me to preach her a sermon. She didn't need a sermon anyway. She had *got it in one* in what she wrote to me. A sermon from me would have been too much and even counter-productive, I suspect.

In her own way, this young woman was *getting* the message of today's gospel through the incarnate presence of caring people by her side! That is all that was needed.

By simply reassuring her that I knew how much her relative carried her in prayer what I implied was that through this person God was near to her.

This was something she realised for herself.

She wasn't disconnected as long as others were near at hand.

In and through others who draw close to her and stand by her side *God-is-with-her!*

Yes, *God-is-with-us!*

I see all this as a reminder of something each one of us needs to hear.

God is with us!

Not only is God with us through others who are there for us, but by our being there for others we carry His presence to them.

For, *God is with us!*

Let me explain.

By our Christian baptism we are Christ.

In the early Church when the newly baptised were presented to the gathered Christian assembly the newly baptised were quite literally lifted up, raised on high, just as the consecrated elements will be lifted up and presented to us today at this Eucharist.

Those gathered in the church would turn to the newly baptised and say: *You are Christ.*

I see this as reminding us that we are all sacraments of Christ ... the Christ who is *God-with-us.*

Each one of us is called to incarnate Christ!

Each one of us is called to be Christ in the flesh for all our brothers and sisters.

Where love is there God is.

We experience the Lord's presence in all our love relationships.

In a society in which increasingly people have little or no contact with Church, where they are less and less likely to approach the sacrament of the altar, for example, we are called to become more consciously aware of our responsibility to be sacraments of Christ for them: signs of the Lord's presence.

We are called to be the Church of the Emmanuel by being there with others and for others ... We are called to be *God-with-others.*

Just think of the responsibility that is ours!

Maybe we will be the only sign of Christ's coming to be with some people whom they will encounter this year at Christmastide.

Some (including many adults) will be so distracted with their waiting for Santa figures that they won't have a thought for Christ.

We can be Christ for those people ... not by preaching them a sermon, but by simply loving them, being there for them, drawing alongside them, being there with them.

I see the last line of today's gospel passage have us think in a special way of our home situations. *Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.*

This line leads me to respond to those who might ask *where is God to be found* in this way: in your home, with your loved ones, in the people with whom you share your life, in those you have welcome in love into your life!

I say that without forgetting or losing sight of something I drew to your attention preaching here on Friday (just two days ago), insisting we should always remember that God is to be found within us.

Yes, *God-is-with-us*.

Saint Augustine reminds us that *He is closer to us than we are to ourselves*.

Augustine's own experience had been a long quest in which he was for years searching for God outside himself only to be led to discover that all the while God whom he was searching for outside himself, was waiting for him within.

May we come to realise that we Christ lives within us, that through others He makes Himself present to us and that through us He makes Himself present to others.

Each one of us is Christ.

We are called to be Christ for each other and for every person we encounter.

Amen!