

Four weeks ago I was re- reading a little book called *Practicing the Presence of God*. I was halfway through it, when I received a call from Josh, asking me if I would like to preach on God present in our lives, as part of a mini sermon series he and Jeremy are running here at St George's. The series is entitled *Being with*.

Co-incidence or God-incidence?

So today I want to explore what it means to live in the presence of God, and I have entitled my sermon *Being present with God*.

According to the Bible God's presence is always present for us, as God provides for us, cares for us and guides us.

In Matthew's Gospel we read: *'Behold I am with you always to the end of the age.'*

God's promise to Moses is *"My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."*

And in Corinthians we read *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you?"*

Acknowledging, recognizing and living in God's presence is central to our faith story.

Personally, I draw great comfort from this assurance that God is always present for me. This was especially true in these past three weeks as I experienced the grief of my mum's passing.

As I journeyed back to South Africa, I was very aware of God's presence, guiding me and supporting me through this difficult life experience.

And yet, sometimes it is difficult to experience God's presence as a reality, especially because we cannot see God or hear God's physical voice.

God acknowledges this when he says to Moses in today's First Testament reading Exodus 33 verse 20 *You cannot see my face*.

The tent mentioned in the text was a portable one which Moses pitched for the people to go to when they wanted to be in the presence of God.

At this time the Israelites were journeying to the promised land through the wilderness.

At each stop Moses pitched a tent some distance outside the Hebrew encampment.

We are told that when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stayed at the entrance while Moses spoke with the Lord, face to face, as one man speaks to another.

The tent was a symbolic reminder of the promise God made that he would be present for His people wherever they journeyed.

God was not confined to one spot like Mount Sinai. Rather God's presence could be found everywhere and any time

his people desired to be with Him.

In the Sentence for today we are reminded that Jesus himself epitomized the presence of God present, for those who seek him. We read that *'The word became flesh and made his dwelling (literally pitched his tent) among us.'*

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to be an ongoing presence in the midst of humanity.

"Behold I am with you always even to the end of the age"

The challenge for us is to discover how we might discern the presence of God in our lives today?

Do we need to be extra holy people to do so?

I don't think so. Moses certainly wasn't.

Do we need to locate ourselves somewhere special to experience God's presence?

Apparently not. The tent of the presence demonstrated the flexibility of God's presence.

In grappling with how to experience the presence of God, I have found the thoughts of two fathers of the Church particularly helpful. The first is Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Order of the Jesuits who in the 15th century and the second is Brother Lawrence the Carmelite monk who lived in 17th Century and whose theology is described in the little book called *Practicing the Presence of God* I was reading when Josh called me.

According to both these theologians, God's presence is a gift to be found in all things; both the ordinary and the extraordinary. This Includes our deepest desires, moments of joy and pain, happiness and sadness.

My own anecdotal experience bears witness to this.

Use the example of my mum's cremation and the dog named Honey.

Seeing God in the ordinary is a foundational principle in Ignatian spirituality which recognizes that God is present in seemingly mundane events of life such as the smell of flowers, the laughter shared between two friends, the sunrise over the sea.

Ignatius believed we sensitize ourselves to recognizing God's presence by developing a mindset of gratitude.

To do this Ignatius developed what has come to be known as the Daily Examen which some of you may already practice.

It is a prayerful reflection on your day which helps you recognize specific areas where God has been present in your life. The pattern is as follows:

1. Open your heart and mind to the notion that no matter where you are, you are in the presence of God. Ask the Holy Spirit to heighten your awareness of God.
2. Review your day and give thanks for the gifts of the day. This cultivates an attitude of gratitude and helps us become more attuned to God's constant graceful giving.

3. Pay attention to your emotions and thoughts as you trace how God is working in your life even through the order and chaos, the joy, and the suffering.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it as the Spirit leads you.
5. Look toward tomorrow and ask for God's grace as you prepare to journey through whatever the day may bring.

The benefits of this discipline are that it encourages us to pay attention to the details of everyday life and to see them as opportunities to know God better and to respond to God's grace with gratitude. Gratitude will grow into love and deepen our awareness of God's presence in our lives, and we will learn to trust that God is with us.

The daily practice of this discipline will change your prayer life. You will find the inner freedom to meet and collaborate with God in all circumstances whether you experience health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure. It allows us to see the potential for a deeper response to God's love in whatever befalls us and to see gift in every situation.

In the case of Brother Lawrence he underwent a life changing experience when he was 18 years old. The sight of a dry and leafless tree standing gaunt against the wintry snow gave him an overwhelming sense of the knowledge and love of God as he contemplated the changes that would occur to the tree in the coming Spring

He felt convicted that God's enriching, enlivening power and provision which would cause the tree to burst into leaf and bear fruit, was also omnipresent. He determined to establish himself in that presence by continually conversing with God and in so doing he would quicken and enliven his faith in God and grow his love for God. He believed that if he continually practiced the presence of God he would start to live out of his growing love for God.

He said that living in the presence of God does not mean that we must necessarily change the work we do. Rather our focus should be on doing even the most mundane things for God's sake. Give our all for the All.

Brother Lawrence worked in the friary kitchen scrubbing floors and washing dishes. He believed this was as prayerful an activity as any because he consecrated all he did to the Lord.

It strikes me that this is exactly what Moses did. He practiced the presence of God. We read that the Lord "would speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend." Moses surrendered his life to God and in so doing crafted his hopes and desires so that they would be in sync with God's will.

"Teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you."

Moses and God had a relationship of profound intimacy. We are told that God knew Moses by name.

God's promise to Moses was that He would be present for Moses, and Moses acted on that promise by sharing every aspect of his life with God until they were intimate friends.

Prayer by its very nature acknowledges that God is with us wherever we are and so wherever we are we are in the presence of God. To strengthen our awareness of God's presence we must like Moses pay attention to God and take the time to acknowledge what God is doing in our lives. When we do so in a spirit of gratitude we grow our love for God and our faith in his promise that his Spirit lives amongst us.

As we read in Corinthians "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you?"

For Reflection:

You are God's temple

How does this affect your world view?

God's Spirit is among you

How might this affect how you live your life

Do the Daily Examen

3 things from yesterday for which you are grateful.

Notice any emotions and thoughts

Choose one of the three things you identified and pray