

St George's 18 January 2026
Emmanuel – the Presence of Christ in the ordinary

Thank you for the privilege of participating in a small way in the teaching at St George's. The teaching ministry here is very special and very much appreciated and I am glad to be able to contribute in a small way.

The recurring theme in the preaching here over the past couple of months has been very clear. Again and again we have talked about the Presence of Christ. It is always the central focus of Advent because the expected saviour is 'Immanuel' 'God with Us', as predicted by Isaiah centuries before. Before Advent we had a short series entitled 'Being With' exploring various perspectives of the Presence of Christ in our life together. Charmaine's contribution to that series challenged us that his presence is a gift to be found in all things, ordinary and extraordinary and she encouraged us to use the Examen Prayer to recognise that Presence in everyday life. Charmaine's message challenged Stan to speak two weeks ago on looking for the Presence of Christ in the people we encounter. Last week we heard about vulnerable children being rescued through encountering the Risen Christ in the lives of his people from the Alongsiders' Ministry. This repeated message of the Presence of the Risen Christ, particularly Charmaine's sermon challenged me, that I should share a few thoughts and experiences about encountering the Risen Christ in my ordinary life. So my message follows Charmaine and Stan's contributions, and it is this 'The Risen Christ is with us in every life experience – look for him and respond.'

1) Matthew's Gospel ends with what I think is one of most important promises to followers of Jesus. '**... remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age**'.

Slide 1 Mt 28^{20b}

Jesus promises to be with you and me now, and always; not just at some future time. He promises to be with us now, in every moment and in every situation.

Yes, he will be present in our gathering for worship.

Yes he will be present in our prayers.

Yes he will be in our exploration of Scripture.

And he will also be with us in the ordinary experiences of life as well.

Christ is absolutely present but in this age, his presence is usually 'embedded' in something that is part of the created world. People, things, actions and life circumstances – Abraham's lunch visitors turn out to be angels. We often talk (and sing) of experiencing God's majesty and creativity through gazing at the Milky Way at night. Most of us have experienced unexpected care coming when it is desperately needed – just a few examples of Christ's immediate presence embedded in created things. This has been described by one Christian thinker as 'mediated immediacy'.

Slide 2 Mediated Immediacy.

The Risen Christ's is always immediately present, but His presence is usually mediated in something that is part of creation. Jesus promises to be with us now, and always, but his presence is likely to be embedded in something very close but something in the created world.

2) Gratitude is our first response to his presence but there is often a next step to add to that response. I would like to encourage us all to look actively for his presence and having discerned what we think might be the Presence of

Christ to determine an appropriate response and take it. It could involve adopting a new attitude, or an encouragement to be a blessing in some situation, or to develop a friendship with someone. The Presence of X has a purpose – as Paul suggests to the Philippians, our Lord wants to accompany us and grow us into our completed place in the Family of God. Gratitude is our first response but is there are next step that we might take in response to his presence?

Of course there is a difficulty in discerning what the activity of Christ in everyday experiences might really be. It can be very difficult to discern his presence and there is always an element of mystery or uncertainty involved and because of this, the likelihood that our response might be a little off-target is very real. I don't think that matters. Step out knowing that we might not yet have got things totally right.

Slide 3 Proverbs 3⁵⁻⁶

I love the proverb that says 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.' If we are acting in response to his presence, he will keep us on track. Even if you are not quite sure, take the next step.

3) I think this element of mystery is meant to be there. We are not meant to be totally sure. Look at the Mt 28 text.

Slide 4 Matthew 28¹⁶⁻²⁰

The disciples were on the mountain top with the Risen Christ right in front of them, promising his presence, and Matthew records, 'When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some them doubted'. Surely with Jesus right there giving them final instructions there would have been no place for doubt. But then if you look at all the encounters with the Risen Christ in the New Testament, in each one there is an element of doubt or incomplete interpretation.

Mary thought he was the gardener, Thomas needed to touch his wounds, Paul's companions on the road to Damascus had a different experience from Paul himself. Mystery is part of these encounters by God's design. These post resurrection encounters (including our own) are absolutely real but with our human limitations we may not understand them completely and our responses may not be perfect, but let's respond anyway and trust him to 'make our paths straight.

4) In the 5 years from 1977 till 1981 Whanganui Central Baptist Church more than doubled in size. Jeanette and I were part of that growth. By 1981 the existing facilities could no longer cope with the numbers and after exploring all sorts of options, over a couple of years, the Church decided that God was leading it to relocate. After a series of miraculous adventures, the Church purchased a site 2 blocks away but at 3000m² it was about a bit too small for what was planned. A quite amazing deal then unfolded with McDonalds who wanted to build over the back fence but could not quite get their planning to work. They also owned the house next to the church property, a massive dilapidated mansion on a 1200m² site. McDonald's agreed to transfer the property to the Church in return for allowing McDonalds' to drive up the Church's back drive to access its drive-through and car park – a net zero cost transaction. Ch and McDs would then share car parking and McD's would arrange and pay for the forming and sealing of both carparks and the drive.

But the Church had to get its drainage in before the date when McDonalds roading contractor would start work. I had designed the church and had been given the role of managing construction on the church site. That drive was

about 80m long and we had to put in a drain the full length at about 1.5m deep. There was a huge trench for the 80m length of drive.

Slide 5 The Trench.

The drain itself was installed and connected to the Council main in the street on the Saturday, 8 days before the committed date for the driveway to be ready for McDonalds. But we had run out of money. We couldn't pay for a machine to backfill and compact the trench or for a plumber to install gulley traps and connections at the upstream end. I contacted a plumber in the church who said he might be able to help the following Saturday, but he couldn't backfill the trench. No one else was available. We had now moved into the old manse on site, the only possibility I could think of was for me and my two older boys to try to fill the trench by hand and compact it as we went. We three agreed we would get up early and work two hours before school and work, Monday to Saturday. After doing this Monday and Tuesday I realised that, despite our best intentions, this was completely ridiculous. I went off to the office on the Tuesday pretty despondent after digging for two hours and making little progress. I sat at my desk and prayed the prayer of a failure. 'Help Lord, we just can't do this'. Instantly my phone rang and it was David, a church member who worked for the Power Board. The Power Board had a tractor with a bucket on it. David's boss had just said to him that the Church could borrow it this weekend. That was unheard of. David said it wasn't much use because he was an admin man and had no clue about driving a digger. I said I would get back to him and hung up. Instantly the phone rang again and it was Derek, a farmer from up the Parapara, who said he was coming into town this weekend and could give the church 4 or 5 hours on Saturday morning, if there was anything to do. Farmers can drive anything and a tractor

with a bucket would be no problem to him. I said there certainly was something to do and agreed to meet him at 7am Sat morning on site. The phone rang again. It was Ray the plumber. He said he couldn't help Saturday morning as he now had to work, but he could do the gulley traps and connections after 2 o'clock Sat afternoon, but the trench had to be filled and the ground at the right level. I told him Derek would finish backfilling the trench by about 2.00pm so that would be perfect.

Slide 6 The trench filled

I was absolutely amazed. I still am. That was the Risen Christ embedded in the lives of those people but also embedded in a situation that was teaching me how real his presence really is.

5) Determining an appropriate response to his presence is not easy. We don't usually see, touch, hear or feel him in the normal way but we can experience him and sense him. There was no doubt that he was in the deal with McDonald's providing the right sized site for the Church. My response to the practical requirements of that deal was inadequate, to say the least, and he provided a rescue. His presence was embedded in those 3 phone calls and the lives behind them. I was beginning to realise there is a lot to learn about responding to his Presence, but there are some simple disciplines that help

Slide 7a The first is a commitment to prayer and particularly the Examen Prayer that Charmaine encouraged us to employ in discerning the presence of Christ in everyday life. His presence is a mysterious reality, so it is always a good question to ask 'Is that really you Lord?'

Slide 7a+b The second is to check that what we think we are discerning is actually consistent with what we know about Jesus from Scripture. Jesus' is always consistent.

Slide 7a+b+c The third, which I should have done when faced with my drains issue, is to share with our fellow disciples, what we think we are discerning and how we think we should respond.

6) Before we began work building the new Church facilities in 1986, we had no idea about how to fund a project, which in today's costs would be about \$6 or \$7M. We had spent all the Church's capital acquiring the site and doing the preparatory work. The Church Treasurer who was managing the finances for the project was reflecting on this challenge and the obvious presence of Christ in the project so far and the unnerving process of getting the drainage done before McDonalds started. In his regular Bible reading he had been working thru Exodus and praying about the things he encountered there. In Chap 23 when God was instructing Israel to move into their new land 'little by little', because they did not have the resources to do it one year, he thought God was speaking to him about the building project strategy – that we were to build 'little by little' with whatever resources came to hand and not try to complete it all in one go over a short period – a very different approach for a conservative accountant. He was so convinced this was what the Risen Christ was saying to him, he went to the elders and told them. The elders were fascinated and very excited. After lots of talk and prayer they decided that the Church was being asked to learn to walk alongside the Risen Christ not knowing how it would turn out. They took the idea to the Church, and with some trepidation the Church adopted it as the strategy they believed that God was giving as the way ahead. We started work. The new church kindy was the easiest bit of the project to start on. I set out the kindy building and one of my sons and I started digging the foundations by hand. We couldn't afford a

digger. An older retired man from church came and joined us.

Slide 8 Digging Foundations

I had some boxing left from a house build I had previously been part of, so we boxed some of the footings. Another man from church dropped in some more boxing and we finished boxing the footings. Someone else donated some reinforcing rod so we prepared the first section of the footings for concrete. When that was ready the Church had saved enough to buy a truckload of concrete, so we poured the first section. Little by little we moved ahead just doing what we had the resources for. When we were ready to pour the Kindy slab which needed to be done in one go and it needed skills we didn't yet have, I was approached by a carpentry tutor from Whanganui Polytech who said he was up to the slab-laying component of the course for building apprentices but he didn't have a practical project to train them on, so he asked, could he lay our kindy slab for us. We gratefully accepted. This was all the action of the Risen Christ, and it came from one person thinking he heard some direction from his Lord during his Bible reading and prayer time and submitting his thoughts to the team.

In 1989 and 90 I organised volunteers to dig foundations and pour footings and slabs for new main block. It was a huge job. **Slide 9 Auditorium from dais** The Auditorium could seat 600 people comfortably, there were 2 big church lounges, a café, offices, youth hall, parts were going to be 3 stories high. **Slide 10 Auditorium from balcony.** It was big construction. **Slide 11 Pulpit and dais** The pictures show the end result but in 1989 it was not like that. The Kindy was finished and operational, but in 1989 the rest of the site looked like this. **Slide 12 Team pouring conc** Picture dated on back April 1989. That boy in the

picture is the same one who was standing behind the pulpit in the previous slide. It could be bit depressing looking at the site at this stage with so much more to do. But we need to train ourselves to see the Risen Christ walking with us in the middle of life's challenges. Rem not obv. Mediated by someone or something. He was challenging others to be involved. That little crew and four crews like it prepared and poured over 1200 square metres of slab and foundations – Little by little the project continued like that until the whole thing was finished.

Conclusion) In the first week of February 1991 we left Whanganui and to begin studying at Carey Bapt College. I had been interim pastor at Whanganui Central Baptist for about 18 months. The people were happy with my ministry. They wanted us to stay on, but the truth was I was struggling. I needed to go and learn my trade if I was going to be effective at this pastoring thing and the new building was now well on the way. But I didn't want to leave. I was in complete denial abt the chnge tht was abt to happen. I worked hard at my pastoring right up to the Saturday night before our farewell and departure very next day. I did not want to go. That Saturday night before our final Sunday I prepared a little farewell talk around a theme of 'be bold, be strong for the Lord your G is with you' the words of instruction that Joshua had received from the angel when he took over from Moses. I wanted to encourage the people to get on and finish the building without me and after my little talk, I planned we would all sing the Scripture in Song chorus with those same words – a very popular song the 1980s. On Sunday morning our car broke down, and we had to walk to church. When we got there (now late) the reality struck me like a hammer blow. This would be the last

time we would meet for worship with these people whom we loved and who had been so good to us. I couldn't speak. I was completely dumbstruck. We were invited to the front for prayer and were given a lovely gift and I was asked to say my few words. I couldn't get one word out. I usually have the exact opposite problem but I couldn't say a thing. My good friend David (from the Power Board digger story) came to front and said if John didn't have any words, he had God's word for John, and he read this.

Slide 13 Joshua 1⁹ - my planned message and what I had been learning through my call to Whanganui.

I struggled through rest of the service and all the emotional farewells. We walked home. I was wondering how we would get to Auckland because the Grk course was starting at 8am the next morning. We had a Baptist College students couple assigned to the church for summer and the couple were staying with us. He was a mechanic by trade and had stayed home from church to fix the car – another angel in disguise. We hooked up trailer loaded with our gear, Jeanette and the 3 boys squashed into the overloaded car, we even had a basket full of mother cat and kittens which the boys were refusing to leave behind, and we headed for Auckland. I had 6 hours drive to think about those verses from God to me. **'Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go'**. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go. That has been my experience my whole life and the promise is for you as well.