



'Getting the Point' 2:

God with us

Jack Mahoney SJ

Continuing his reflections on scriptural passages that we can sometimes struggle to understand, Fr Jack Mahoney asks us to consider what the idea of God being 'with' us means. What can we learn from the many instances of this phrase in the Old and New Testaments, and how should its meaning manifest itself in our daily lives?

The idea of God being 'with' someone is one of the most common and yet one of the richest expressions in the Bible, running like a thread through the Old and the New Testaments. In Exodus, God promises to be 'with' Moses and then 'with' Joshua. God is also 'with' the kings and judges of Israel, as well as 'with' the great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The theme of God being 'with' us also runs through the psalms and is found most famously in Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd: 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me...'

It is also striking, once one thinks about it, how frequently the idea appears in the New Testament also. In Matthew's Gospel, the name to be given to Jesus is 'Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us' (Mt 1:23); and the risen Jesus ends the gospel by promising his disciples that he will be 'with' them to the end of time (Mt 28:20). In Luke, the angel addressing Mary assures her that 'the Lord is with you' (Lk 1:28), just as Luke also tells us that the hand of the Lord was 'with' John the Baptist (Lk 1:66). Indeed, in John's Gospel we find Jesus himself describing his Father as being 'with' him: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me' (John 16:32).

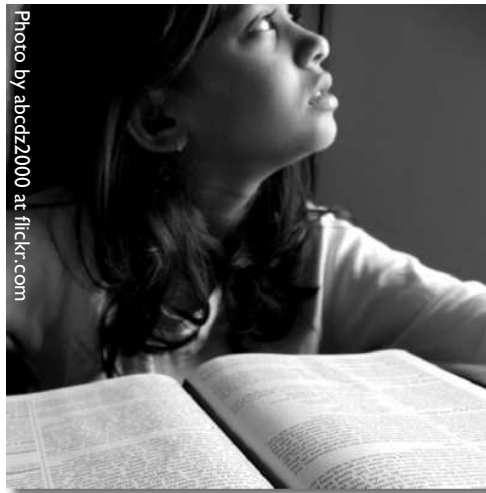


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Reference to God's being 'with' Jesus can also be found in the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter describes to Cornelius and his family how Jesus 'went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38). Elsewhere in Acts, the Lord appears in a vision to Paul in Corinth to strengthen him: 'Do not be afraid, but speak out and do not be silent; for I am with you and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you' (Acts 18:9-10). Indeed, Paul closed his letters to the Corinthians with the blessing: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you' (1 Cor 16:21), and more fully, 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (2 Cor 13:12).

So what are we to make of all these references to God being 'with' various people? We find them from Moses right through to John the Baptist and Paul and Jesus himself. I suggest that, if we examine some of the passages, we can find a pattern revealing itself, which can throw light on all of them. The simplest instance is in the early conversation between God and Moses (Ex 3:4-13) when God called to Moses from the burning bush and told him that he intended to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery by sending Moses to Pharaoh. 'But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh to bring my people, the

Israelites, out of Egypt?” To which God replied simply, ‘I will be with you’ (Ex 3:12). And so it came to be.

In other words, God has a mission for Moses, but Moses simply doesn’t feel up to it, as he is not slow to point out. But that is not the point: God will be with him. It will be God working through Moses who will bring about God’s design. We can see how, after Moses died, he was succeeded by Joshua as leader of Israel, and the book of Joshua informs us that God repeated his promise to Joshua in turn: ‘As I was with Moses, so I shall be with you: I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous...’ (Josh 1:5-6).

Later, in the calling of Gideon to save Israel in the Book of Judges, we can sense the Jewish delight in spelling out the details of this argumentative conversation with God:

The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, ‘The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.’ Gideon answered him, ‘But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying “Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?” But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hands of Midian.’ Then the Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.’ He responded, ‘But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.’ The Lord said to him, ‘But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.’ (Judg 6:12-16).

Perhaps the most powerful exposition of this pattern of divine commission and reassurance is to be found at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, when the prophet complains piteously of his personal inadequacy, “‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you”, says the Lord’ (Jer 1:6-8).

The most delicate presence of this pattern might be discerned in the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to the young girl, Mary, in Luke 1: 26-38. As we can now see, the angel’s introductory greeting sets the scene for

the whole drama: ‘And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.” Mary is upset and unsure what is happening, but the angel explains what her divine commission will be, whereupon she objects that she is unsuited to the purpose. But the angel reassures her of the divine power at work in her. And she finally consents, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

From such dialogues we can learn that God’s being ‘with’ us, his presence in us, is a dynamic, not a static, presence. It is a presence with a purpose, a power through which God is using us for his purpose in spite of our personal inadequacy. It is a challenge and yet a comfort to know that we are not alone in what is asked of us, however demanding it may be. ‘Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me...’ (Ps 23: 4). As we hear Jesus himself saying, ‘I am not alone. He who sent me is with me’ (Jn 16:32). This simple phrase is enough now in itself to help us fill out the details: Jesus has been commissioned by his Father for a particular task, but he can feel inadequate for it, as the agony in the garden in the other gospels makes clear. Nonetheless, God will be with him to support him and will not forsake him in spite of his feeling of dereliction (Mt 27:46).

I suggest we keep an eye and an ear open in the liturgy and our reading of the Bible so that we might pick up the references to God being ‘with’ us and his other chosen servants and appreciate their full theological significance. This should encourage us to appreciate the theological depth of the simple universal greeting with which we Christians are so familiar that it glides off our minds regularly without our appreciating it: ‘the Lord be with you’. This should stop us regularly in our tracks: it is not just a blessing; it always implies a previous commission. For God promises to be ‘with’ us regardless of our inadequacies so that he can bring about what he is asking us to do in our lives. That’s the point.

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