

The Music of God

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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As we have taken this Advent journey we have been moving from darkness to light and the considering the justice and mercy of God. On this Sunday we hear the promise of God *via* the prophet Isaiah and the angel of God that that Messiah would be born and be called Immanuel—he would be God with us. Matthew's gospel begins with the announcement of Immanuel and it ends the same way with the appearance of the angel at the tomb on the day of resurrection. In other words, Matthew's story begins with the promise of Immanuel ends with the promise of Immanuel to remain present with his disciples. In Matthew the ascension is not mentioned. What Matthew emphasizes is the presence of God in the world, not his absence. In our humanity, our longing, our need, our world with all its beauty and brokenness, God is with us. This is the great message of Christmas, the story of the incarnation of God the Son—God becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

For me this begs the question: Where was God before this point? Where is God after this point? And how does this make any difference to us and the world we are called to love?

According to scripture, God is recognized as the God of Abraham, Jacob and Moses who called an ethnic group of people together into a covenant relationship where they were chosen amongst all other people to be his people and he was their one God, alone and above all others. This is the mighty, powerful God of the psalms and prophets who is Lord of the universe, who quells the storms, subdues Leviathan and floods the earth. He is also the God who walks with Moses, appears in dreams and comes in the stillness and silence.

The coming of Christ, the birth of the Messiah, is the point at which the promise is grounded in place and time. It is incarnated in a baby in a village in Palestine, through the labour of a woman, Mary, and the faithfulness of a man, Joseph. The baby is Immanuel—God with us. And not just God with us, but as one of us, for to be truly with us God must become one of us—flesh and blood.

I might have told you this story before so forgive me if I have but when I taught religious education at Radford College (not an activity for the faint hearted let me tell you!) we would ask the question, "If you accept the premise that there is another reality beyond the one you can see, touch and hear, that you can sense and measure, and a being from that reality wanted to communicate with beings from this one, how would they do it?" The kids would say—by dreams, ideas, angels—all very biblical of course and then at some point, some dear, delightful child would say, by becoming human, by becoming one of us.

We all know Christmas is not the end of the story. Immanuel, God with us, one of us, grows into manhood, strong and filled with wisdom, as Luke's gospel tells us. He then shows a **RADICALLY** new way of being in the world. It is the way of love, peace, inclusion and freedom. It is so radical we humans keep misinterpreting and misunderstanding the message. This Immanuel, this God with us, is then crucified on Calvary, bearing all the weight of our violence and hatred. But death is not the end. Violence and hatred is not the end. Three days later, Immanuel, God with us, is still with us. No thing, no one, no action can break the promise and the radical message which becomes stronger and clearer than ever. Fifty days later, the resurrected Immanuel, Jesus the man, ascends to the creator, returns to the place of origin and completion and he takes us to that same place. Remember the point of the incarnation is redemption—that is the journey we are on.

Does this mean that 2000 years ago give or take a year or two that God then disappeared into some distant heavenly region and is no longer Immanuel, God with us? Well if we are truly Trinitarian and living a Trinitarian reality then the answer is no. As Jesus promised, he would continue to be with us. He would be present in and through his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. And this is of course what the church is—it is a community of the followers of Christ Jesus, who live his way and truth—his message, with him and through him, in the power of his Spirit. It is the community that gathers around the Lords table sharing in his presence through the sacrament of bread and wine.

Now, I have given you a potted version of the salvation story as understood in the experience and teaching of the Christian Church down the centuries, give or take a heresy or two. It is a story with a beginning, a pivotal world changing middle and an end we are still travelling towards. It is a narrative of Immanuel, God with us.

What I want to do now is give you another way to imagine Immanuel, God with us, because one of the difficulties we have with the language we have to describe God is how limited it is. Theologians know this of course and when you do theology 101 at university the first point that the lecturer makes is how woefully inadequate are all our conceptions of God. And then trying to fit the notion of God into our modern context is even harder. When we think about Immanuel, God with us, we tend towards two extremes. We either cannot comprehend it all because we have a picture of the classic deist God who exists outside space and time, completely separate from reality or we conflate God and reality and end up with pantheism, where God is identified with reality. In this idea God and the world lose their discreteness, their uniqueness and therefore their freedom. In the narrative I told God seems to pop in and out like an unpredictable jack in the box. At the centre of this dilemma is the fact that we are picturing God and the world as discrete entities that by their very nature cannot occupy the same space and time.

When we try and live with this picture only we end up with the idea that somehow God exists just over our left shoulder, or beside us, or sometimes within us in some empty space or even up somewhere in the clouds. God will occasionally, on good days, intervene in our reality, directing the worldly traffic, or whisper directions in our ear or heart. Or sometimes it just seems like he is ignoring us like a disappointed father ignores an unruly child. I am not saying these things don't happen. I believe and know they do. The narrative I told is the story of the relationship between a personal God and his people and how God has tried to communicate over the millennia. It is narrative that contains the experience of generations of people of faith. Like my theology 101 lecturers I am suggesting this picture has its limitations particularly for those who find freedom in their relationship with God and the idea of an interventionist God hard to understand.

What I say next will I hope fill out the narrative and helps us live the knowledge of God with us as we live each moment, as we breathe each breath, as we embrace the world around us. This idea is not mine. It comes from the work of Jeremy Begbie the theologian, musician and musicologist. He would say he didn't make it up either but is built upon scripture and the ideas of others.

So to fill the story out, instead of imagining God and ourselves as discrete objects in space and time, imagine God and each one of us as sounds, musical notes. For this I need my iPod and my violin.

The thing with music is two or more notes can occupy the same space and time. All musical genres reveal this. I have just two to share ... In these examples many notes sound and make a totality of musical experience. Each of the notes are part of the whole yet remain distinct

and free. But in music there is something else going on. If I play this G it resounds through the sound system but if I play the D string next to it at the same time the two notes create a fuller, richer sound. In fact the two strings set each other off. One vibrates in response to the other. One is freed by the other to become more of the string it can be.

Paul Tillich famously said that God was the ground of our being. What Jeremy Begbie helps us know is that this ground of being is not some amorphous something. The ground of our being is rather the resonance of God that enables creation to become the creation it is meant to be. God is the eternal note that sounds and by doing so enables us to sound, to ring out in our lives. God with us, Immanuel, occupies the same space and time as us in an integrated but completely free way—our freedom and God's freedom complete and intact and making beautiful, creative music together. This picture of God with us also fits much better with the Christian mystical understanding of God where union with God and Reality is experienced. A Christian mystic will tell you that the Reality they experience is like their body and soul resonating with indescribable beauty.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who amongst being theologian, pastor and political activist was also an accomplished musician and a lover of Bach wrote from his Nazi prison, *'God requires that we should love him eternally with our whole hearts, yet not so as to compromise or diminish our earthly affection, but as a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. ... where the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint from being developed to the utmost of its limits. ... only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness, and assure us that nothing can go wrong so long as the cantus firmus is kept going. ... put your faith in the cantus firmus.'*

This is one of the reasons that the extraordinary, beautiful music we have at St Philip's is such a blessing. It awakens us to this way of experiencing and knowing Immanuel, God with us. Tonight we will sing Christmas carols and raise our spirits in praise. I reckon the angels and the universe sings with us.

This Christmas, when we remember that Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us, may we sing his praise and give thanks for his enduring love and presence. Amen.