

WHO IS GOD?—2

Exodus 17:1–7; Matthew 26:1–30

The people of Israel in the wilderness, in the first reading tonight, asked a significant question:

Is the LORD among us or not?

You are sitting here in church, and you may have come to church because you sense that you have some connection with God—or would like to—but you may have the same question going around in your own mind: ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

It is a question that is certainly out there in the community. There it may not take the form of ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’ but rather: ‘Is there such a person as the LORD at all—is God real?’ Whatever conclusion we may have come to on that score, that is a form of the question that is constantly confronting us, that we cannot ignore.

For the Israelites in the wilderness, fifteen hundred years or so before Christ, it wasn’t so much a question of whether God was real or not—God had just rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and taken them safely through the waters of the Red Sea, and had destroyed their enemies. So in their recent experience the Israelites had plenty of evidence that God was real. What they were asking this time was: ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’—is God with us, is God for us, is He going to help us now? That too is a significant question.

It’s a question that comes to us particularly when we are going through a hard time. On a lovely day, when you are feeling free and light-hearted, and something happens that goes your way, we find it easy to say, ‘There is a God!’—and He’s looking after us well. But when the shadows grow, and troubles come, and we’re not doing so well, and things seem to be against us, that’s when we’re tempted to say, ‘If there is a God, then I don’t think He’s here’—He’s not doing much to help us. That was the situation of the Israelites—they thought they were going to die of thirst there in the

wilderness. So they asked, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’—is God with us, is God for us, is He going to help us now?

There are two ways can ask this question—two tones of voice we can ask it in, from two different heart attitudes. We can ask it in a contentious way: ‘Is the LORD among us—or not!’ That is not so much a question seeking an answer as a statement making a point. That is the way the Israelites were asking it—they were contending with Moses and they were contending with God—they were putting God on trial. And as long as we are asking in that contentious way, we will never get an answer. We will only be reinforcing ourselves in the point we want to make, and we will be further hardened in the attitude of heart that is behind it. To get out of that, we need to be able to ask the question in a different way, with a different tone of voice—more open, and with a humbler attitude of heart, asking the question because we know we haven’t got the answer and we really want to find it out: ‘Is the LORD among us or not—?’ If He is, that’s wonderful! If He is not—that’s terrible! Being more open and humble does not mean being meek and compliant. We can still ask God anything we want to know. They do in the Psalms: Why do you hide your face? All this has come upon us. But we have not forgotten You (see Psalm 44). We really need to know where we stand with You; where You stand with us. Can you see the difference between those two ways of asking? One is asking from somewhere within a relationship with God, with a longing for God; and I can tell you that if you ask in that way you will get your answer, one way or another. The other is remaining determinedly outside of any relationship with God, and demanding an answer from there; and let me tell you if you ask in that way you’ll never get it—because you have already made up your mind. It’s the difference between faith and defiance. If we are asking that question tonight—‘Is the LORD among us or not?’—I hope our hearts’ desire is to ask it from a position of faith—even if it is with the prayer: ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24).

If we are asking that question tonight, I want to attempt to give us an answer from the second reading. There we saw a woman come in to where Jesus was attending a dinner party, and she poured out costly fragrant oil all over him. There were other things going on around Jesus at this time. On the one hand the rulers of the people were plotting to capture Jesus and kill him. Jesus was well aware of this. On the other hand, Jesus own disciples

scarcely understood him, and were more concerned for their own advancement, and they took indignant exception to this woman and what they called such a waste of costly fragrant oil. Jesus said to them, What she has done to me is a good thing. In fact he said: What she has done to me is the gospel. The gospel is what we are calling in our Lenten studies over the next five weeks ‘The Good News of God’. Jesus said, ‘Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will be told’—she will be remembered for it.

What was it that the woman had done that made it a proclamation of the gospel, the good news of God? Two things. First, Jesus indicated, She knows and understands what is going to happen to me. She knows that I will be taken hastily and put to death violently, and that she will have no opportunity to anoint my body or pay her last respects after I have died. So she is doing it now. ‘For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial.’ But secondly, what made this a proclamation of the good news of God was indicated in the way she did it—at such cost, in such abundance, with such love. Something has happened to her. Jesus recognises that she has come into the extravagant and abundant love of the heavenly Father, and that is why her affectionate gratitude and her outpoured love towards him are correspondingly great. In a version of this in one of the other gospel writings, she has come into the wonderful forgiveness of all her sins—that is why she has poured out her love towards Jesus in this way. She could see that in his terrible death he would be pouring himself out as a fragrant and pleasing offering to God in a way none of us have ever been able to do. There he would bear all our sins and their terrible judgement in a way that we never could—our preference for self-advancement, our violence against one another, our defiance of God—and take them all away, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God. And that is the good news. ‘Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will be told’ and she will be remembered for it.

As if to make this abundantly clear, a little later we heard, at the evening meal the last night before he died, ‘Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you”. His blood was going to be separated out from his body—he

was about to die a violent death. And this would not be on his own account but for them, and they would need to somehow take it into themselves—eat it, drink it in, participate in what was happening in him, ‘feed on him by faith with thanksgiving’—to be able to receive the benefit of it. And what would that benefit be? “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And what is the outcome? “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” Christ ‘suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God’ (1 Peter 3:18). That is the gospel—the good news of God.

That good news of God and all its implications for us we will be going through over the next five weeks of Lent in the Lenten studies—Monday night, Tuesday morning or Tuesday night—still time to join in—and in the Sunday preaching, as we have started to do today. What a rich feast—the new wine of our Father’s kingdom and good rule over all things! Then perhaps we’ll be able to give a good answer to the question, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

But it could be—may it please God—that we end up in a place where we don’t even have to ask the question at all any more, because it is no longer a question for us. When we are able to see the goodness and blessing of God in everything around us. Paul the apostle said to some people who had not yet believed in God: ‘He has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy’ (Acts 14:17). To another group of unbelievers he said: ‘He gives to all life, breath, and all things’ and ‘He is not far from each one of us; “for in Him we live and move and have our being”’, and He has made us so we can feel for Him and find Him, ‘For we are also His offspring’—we can know Him, like Jesus does, as ‘Our Father’ (Acts 17:25, 27–28).

‘Is the LORD among us or not?’ May the day come, as it surely will, when there will no longer be any question about it.