

I remember when I was growing up, one of the comedians our family loved to watch was Dave Allen. For those of you who recall him, you will remember a delightfully irreverent look at life, at organised religion. If you are lucky enough to be young enough not to remember him, just enter ‘Dave Allen’ on Youtube and you will see what I mean. Even in my youth, I was impressed by the fact that, even though he had walked away from the faith of his upbringing, he always ended each show with ‘May your God go with you.’

His style, his particular humour was influenced by the society in which he grew up in the Ireland of the 1950’s. In that society there was an element of fear, of guilt, of retribution. This would find expression in severe Protestant circles in a rather dour character walking up and down the street, bearing a sign proclaiming, ‘The end of the world is nigh’. God’s impending arrival is approaching and it is not going to be pretty. The urgency is our encounter with God some time in the future. The danger is that the individual is so focussed on what happens after death, that our encounter with God in the present is pushed to the margin. It can become focussed on my personal salvation, my personal preservation – in the process I may lose sight of God’s purposes for me in the present. This can in the process distort our reading of Scripture, our understanding of the teaching of Jesus.

Take our Gospel reading for today, containing as it does the parable of the watchful servants. It is not a parable about a future encounter. Rather it is a parable about an encounter in the present. So let us look at this parable through the lens of other sayings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels.

In the course of his ministry, in the context of teaching about dealing with discord in the Church, Jesus promises his disciples:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” *Matthew 18:20*

Christ in our midst as we gather for worship, as we listen to his word, as we share the bread and wine, as we pray for the Church, for those in need, for the world, for ourselves. Christ in our midst as we meet to discuss the affairs of the Church in Vestry; Christ in our midst in Choir, in Youth Club, Men’s Breakfast, Garden Group. He is there. Let us acknowledge, let us honour his presence in all that we think and say and do.

At different points in his ministry, Jesus challenged his hearer to recognise the dignity, the humanity of those who were different; the Samaritan, the leper, the tax collector, the sinner. He goes even further than that in his parable of the sheep and the goats.

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ *Matthew 25:31ff*

Christ comes to us; we encounter Christ in those on the margins of our society. There is a style of political discourse developing that would seek to demonise those who are different, those who are ‘problems’, those of different race,

sexuality, gender, culture. If it were not for ‘them’ our problems would go away. But Christ is there, in our midst; he encounters us in the different – may that simple realisation inform the society in which we live, in the politics we choose to adopt.

St Matthew closes his Gospel with the account of one final meeting of the Risen Jesus with his disciples:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” *Matthew 28:16-20*

It is a passage that we know well; perhaps so well that we stop listening as it is read us. I remember a friend pointing out to me some years ago that Matthew did not tell us of disciples all of one mind; some worshipped, some doubted. And it is to worshipper and doubter alike that Jesus gives the great commission; it is to worshipper and doubter alike that Jesus makes the promise, ‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

He is with us as we are, in our strength and our weaknesses, in our faith and in our doubts. In the words of the blessing that I would use from time to time:

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:  
let him lead you each day into the quiet place  
of your heart, where he will speak with you;  
know that he watches over you –  
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,  
that he is with you always,  
wherever you are and however you may feel:

