

SFX 23A 2023

St Matthew's Gospel, as we have it today, was probably written a decade after that of St Mark. Matthew takes the story of Jesus as written by Mark, but changes it, adapts it, and develops it. One of the key differences is that while Mark gives us a sense of the story of Jesus as it unfolds, particularly emphasising our Lord's Passion, St Matthew has one eye on the story of Jesus, but another eye on the congregation he is writing for, for whom Jesus is not in the past, as in some history book, but is a living presence. He wants to teach them how to be a community with Christ at the centre, in five great sermons Jesus stops to teach them about life together. How to get on together, and what happens when things fall apart.

When St Matthew announces the coming of Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel he says he will be called 'Emmanuel' - meaning God with us. And he ends the Gospel with the words of Jesus saying that he will be with us always, "Yes, to the end of time." Matthew speaks of how the Lord is present in his community. But not just his community but ours too. The Lord is here. He says it in today's Gospel. "Where two or three gather in my name, I will be there in the midst of them." He is here when we gather to pray and worship.

When we gather at Mass the priest says: "The Lord be with you." You could think of them as words of greeting - like "Hello" or "Good Morning." Why doesn't the priest be friendly and say simply that? Because the priest has something more beautiful to say. "The Lord be with you."

It is a very unique and special greeting that has been used in our liturgy since the 2nd Century and we hear four times in the Mass.

It echoes the words of the angel Gabriel to Our Lady: "The Lord is with you" the angel says. Jesus Christ is about to be made flesh, is about to come into her midst. And for us, throughout the Mass when we hear that greeting there is a sense that Christ is about to be made flesh in our midst. First as we gather - the opening greeting, before the Gospel when he speaks to us; before the great Eucharistic prayer by which he feeds us with himself. And the final greeting when we are to take his presence out to others.

For again Jesus says in St Matthew's Gospel where we can find the Lord. In the hungry and the thirsty, in the lonely, in those in prison.

The Latin in fact has no verb - "Dominus Vobiscum" meaning literally "The Lord, with you." But we could equally say: "The Lord is with you." It is the loveliest thing we can say, and is at the heart of our faith, the presence of God.

Does it matter if the day is dark or full of sunshine? Does it matter if disaster has fallen upon us or we are riding high on the crest of a wave? For some of us the greeting is packed with hope and good cheer. For others that grieve or are hurt, it is comfort and relief. The Lord is with us. And because he is with us, we are his Church: we are the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church assembled in this place of worship. For "where two or three are gathered in my name" the Lord is at hand. What a penetrating insight on the character of our Eucharistic assembly! His presence constitutes us as the worshipping community that has God "called out of darkness into his marvelous light."

One of the loveliest things as Catholics is the sense that the Lord is always near. We never come into an empty church because the Lord is here. Of course we believe him to be really, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament as a unique form of presence. But he is also really present - so the church teaches - in the Congregation as it gathers, in the priest who presides in his name and in his word as he speaks to us.

But we can be like angels to others as Gabriel was to Mary. We can pray in our hearts as we meet people. The Lord be with you, the Lord is with you. Then we might start honouring every human person we meet, paying honour to every human being made in the image and likeness of God.