



Advent 4, Year A – December 19, 2010

Matthew 1.18-25

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

This then is Matthew's first word about Jesus of Nazareth. He is *Emmanuel*, *God with us*. It is also the *last* word, for this, remember, is the gospel which concludes with these words, even as Jesus ascends back to whence he came: "Lo, *I am with you* always, even to the end of the age." Make no mistake: the "withness" of God is an important, even controlling, idea for Matthew, in his understanding of what Jesus is for us. Whether gadding about Galilee, or set at the right hand of the Father — that is, whether seen or unseen — Jesus is God with us.

Perhaps we are so used to this idea that we fail any longer to see how radical an assertion it is. We are saying that God, the awful, holy, majestic and transcendent God, the God who has better things to do than spend his time messing around on Planet Earth, let alone at 3602 8 Street Southwest, is with us. We are not alone. The fear of abandonment is deeply imprinted on the human psyche: I don't know if we were born with it, or if we learned it the time the elevator door closed in our face before our mother managed to get into the elevator with us. I do know that the prospect of desertion terrifies us - and terrifies us precisely because deep down we are afraid that we will eventually cease to please our partner, our co-worker, our children, our employer, our friends. That we are somehow unworthy of their affection or good opinion, and it is only a matter of time before the truth will out. This is the astonishing pronouncement made to us about Jesus: for when it comes to God there is quite simply no question of worthiness, no question that God is in this for what he can get out of it, and for only such time as he gets what he wants. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, no matter what. And he isn't leaving.

Of course, the "withness" of God admits of a richer interpretation than mere "preposition." I take it we may think of God as being "with us" in the same sense that we ourselves might be described as being "with the program." In other words, God is not just on hand, but paying attention, interested, even committed to us. Not just "there," that is, but "present."

The "withness" of God bears the weight of yet another interpretation, this one suggested by one of Jesus' own sayings, "Those who are not with me, are against me." The obverse must also hold: if God is with us, then he is not against us. I will grant that this is hardly an original thought; but that doesn't necessarily mean we really believe it. There are too many of us who go at life adversarially, as if every task or problem which presented itself were an obstacle to be got through, over or around, rather than today's agenda. You get in a traffic jam and understand it to be impeding your rightful work, rather than seeing the negotiation of a traffic jam to be your work for the moment. To treat life as the enemy is to behave as if we believe God is the enemy, or to put it the other way, as if God were against us. God is not against us: in Christ, he is Emmanuel.

All this brings us to an important caution. Just because God is with us, does not mean that God is either willing or likely to anoint our every whim or fancy with divine approbation, or to champion our cause with irresistible divine grace. Jesus may signal that God is our *companion*, but be warned, that does not make him our *possession*.

This is noteworthy, given the sizeable number of Christians who seem to believe that the main reason for making friends with God is to have a talisman in

their pocket, One who will prosper their lives, intervene when bidden, and direct the course of history in favour of his friends.

But Jesus is simply not to be “had” in this way. This is a point made most emphatically by the example of his parents. Think of it: Joseph and Mary were, of all people, most readily to be forgiven for thinking of Jesus as “theirs.” And yet, in Joseph’s case, Jesus was both his and not his. The same is true of Mary. The child in her womb is both hers and not hers. Much though she may have wished to cherish, even hoard, the Godness within her, the truth is that Jesus would not (indeed could not) be possessed by her, not even as foetus. She cannot hold him indefinitely: the horizons of her body (and no doubt, of her imagination) are too small to contain him. The consequences of endeavouring to possess even her nascent Son are amply evident: either she will destroy him, or he will destroy her. In Christ, God is indeed with us, but on God’s terms, not ours.

Know this, then, as we prepare to present ourselves at the manger. Ours is a God who wants to be our companion in the journey. And he will do anything to prove it. He will be born as one of us. And if that doesn’t work, he will even die as one of us. What we need to remember is that this companion remains God: he is not to be manipulated, nor even prayed, into our control, he is neither to be possessed, nor used. This may be something other than we had secretly hoped: it is none other than what we truly need.