

“GOD IS IN THIS PLACE”
Genesis 28:10-22; 1 Corinthians 14:20-25

I wonder what you expect to find here each Sunday morning as you arrive for the service. What do you come here for? And what are your expectations? Maybe you come to see friends. Maybe you come because you like the music. Perhaps it's for the teaching. Perhaps it's for the coffee. It may be a place of reflection and meditation for you. It may be somewhere to escape from the hurly-burly of everyday life and have a good rest. This story may coincide with your experience. The minister's sermon on this particular Sunday was considerably longer than normal. However, it was so well prepared and inspiring that he just knew it would be a big hit with the congregation. At the end of the service he stood shaking hands with parishioners as they went out. One man paused and said, "Pastor, your sermon was so invigorating and inspiring and refreshing." As the minister broke out in a big smile, the man completed his comment by adding, "Why, I felt like a new man when I woke up!"

For Jacob, in the story we've just read from *Genesis 28*, he was expecting a place to sleep at the particular stage of his journey he'd reached. He was tired from travelling and simply lay down on the ground with one of the many stones that covered the desert floor as a pillow. But he got a lot more than he expected. While he was asleep he had a vivid vision and a dramatic encounter with God himself. And when he woke up, he recognised that God was in that place. It transformed his life.

Are we aware that God is here? We sing about it. We read about it. We pray about it. We believe that Jesus promised he would be with us when we meet together in his name. But did any of you come in here this morning expecting to meet with God? Do you leave here each Sunday morning saying, "*Surely the LORD is in this place*"? I suspect that's not the case for most of us (but you never know, do you?). But if you did realise that God was here, would it make any difference to your attitude and your behaviour?

Meeting with God is an awesome thing. Jacob said "*How awesome is this place!*" It was just an isolated corner of a Middle Eastern desert, but God's presence made it awesome, holy, unforgettable. This is just a little nineteenth century preaching box – four walls and some banners. But if God is here, then it's an awesome place and coming here on Sunday (or any other time) should be an awe-inspiring experience, an experience that should move us to a response – as did Jacob's encounter. He set up an altar, made a vow and promised to honour God in all that he did.

God is in this place. **That should inspire our worship.** We don't set up an altar as such, but we do, I hope, offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise. I know our worship is fairly well regimented and most weeks we just do what the person at the front here suggests. But that framework of worship – music, prayer, reading, teaching, sacraments – is really designed to help us all draw a bit closer to God. And within it there is usually an opportunity for us all to respond to God in a personal way (even if we are doing it all with the same words). It's not intended as an opportunity to sit back and watch or listen to what's going on, but as an opportunity to encounter the living, awesome, holy God. If you don't get some sense of that, then, really, it has been unsuccessful as a time of worship. It's like the story of the old Pentecostal Christian who was praying aloud during a particularly exuberant time of worship. "Lord, this is wonderful. Lord, this music is just amazing. Lord, we are really praising you, Lord. Lord, we thank you for such a tremendous experience. But, Lord, last week was even better. Oh Lord, you should have been here then." Come expecting to meet God, eager to encounter him in some way, wanting to hear his voice, ready to sense his Holy Spirit.

God is in this place. **That should motivate us in our commitment.** Jacob met God and then made a vow. It changed his attitude to God and to life. From this point on, if you know the story of Jacob (which we haven't got time to go into this morning), he was changed man – and from that changed man came a nation through whom God changed the world. When we come here and encounter God through the work of his Holy Spirit, when we allow our lives to be changed by Jesus, then it should have some transforming effect on our attitudes and should move us forward in our commitment to him. If you ever

get the opportunity to listen to or be with some famous inspirational character – at a musicians’ masterclass, a writers’ workshop, a sports coaching session, at a management seminar, at a time of testimony – you are inspired. You want to be like that person, to do what they do, to do your best in that field. How much more is that the case with God! You can’t get much more inspirational than that! If you leave through that door on Sunday the same person you were when you came in, then, really, it has been an unsuccessful time of worship.

God is in this place. **That should cause us to honour God in all that we do.** Jacob told God he would give him a tenth of everything he received. He honoured him with a tithe. He used his resources to respond to God. Do we honour God in our worship? If we knew he was here, would we behave differently? I suspect there would be an attitude of overwhelming reverence if we really believed God was here. We’d ensure we were here in plenty of time. We’d make sure we were reared to meet him. We’d want this place to look the very best it could. We’d concentrate on God at the expense of everything and everyone else. Worship would be worship, true worship – not a parroting of songs and prayers between chats to our friends, not an opportunity to look round and see what everyone else is doing and wearing, not just something to do while the Sunday joint cooked, not simply something we do on Sunday because that’s always what we do (we’ve forgotten quite why). If your attitude of reverence for God is not deepened through your coming here, then, really, it has been an unsuccessful time of worship.

But if we do recognise that we’re about something special here, if we do encounter God here because he is in this place, if we do get involved in the application of biblical worship to our personal lives – then there are other things that will flow from it. Paul writes about that in the second passage we read this morning. In *1 Corinthians 14* he is writing to the Christians at Corinth to give them some advice about how they conduct their worship. The actual bit we read was about the relative merits of speaking in tongues and prophecy. Prophecy is what I take to be the application of biblical worship to our personal lives. That’s what it’s about, he says. Prophecy is an integral part of worship, speaking into situations with an insight that is granted by a real and present God, through his Holy Spirit.

Now, says Paul, if that is happening, not only will you – the regular worshippers – benefit from it, but those who are visitors, who don’t necessarily know all about the Christian life, will nevertheless sense that there’s something special going on and will say “*God is really among you*” – “God is in this place”. Every now and then someone says on the way out of church that they really sensed God’s presence in the worship – and that’s a great spur to evangelism, to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

I encountered the other side of it a bit in the summer. Sally and I had an afternoon in Glastonbury, one of the weirdest places I’ve been for a long time. It seemed that every shop in the main street was some kind of New Age emporium, selling crystals, Tarot cards, books on the occult and, in one shop window, a goddess healing wand (a snip at £175). The town hall was playing host to a Goddess Convention (whatever that may be) and there were quite a lot of very unusual people, products and posters about the place. And it all made me feel very uncomfortable. There was a real sense of spiritual powers at work. I wonder if people who come into Wade Street Church can sense the power of God at work. Would people who come in here be able to say, “*God is really among you.*” If they can’t, then something is wrong.

That little phrase is actually a quotation from the little prophecy of *Zechariah* in the Old Testament. And there it is once again in the context of God’s people really encountering him and allowing that to make a difference to them. It’s in *Zechariah 8:23*. The challenge to us is to live lives of such quality that people say, “There’s something going on here. God is involved. I want a bit of what she’s got.” That’s the prophecy that *Zechariah* gave to God’s people in the earlier part of the chapter. He looks forward to a time when the people of Israel would be so obviously blessed by God that everyone else would want a bit of the action. They live with a sense of peace, and they lead a life characterised by contentment and serenity. They are eager to go to worship (v19) and they show love for one another (vv16,17). And such is the quality of the lives they lead that we have this bizarre and comical image at the end of the chapter

of ten people from other races clinging to the hem of the robes of one of God's people and saying that they want to be a part of this too – *“Let us go with you because we have heard that God is with you.”*

Can you imagine that? Walking through the Market Square or down St John Street on your way to church on a Sunday morning, a smile on your face and an enthusiasm for worship in your step, because you know you are going to meet God, because when you get there everyone will be saying, “God is in this place.” And by the time you get here, you've got ten people tugging at your sleeve saying, “Go on, let us come to church with you because we want a bit of what your God's got to offer.”

If we really believed that God was here – and expected him to be. If we were really prepared to respond to his awesome presence, it would transform our worship and our evangelism. It would fill us with the same kind of awe that Jacob felt, and that would have an effect on those whom we welcome in here and whom we meet day by day in our workaday lives. I'd be on for a bit of that – how about you?

(Housegroup notes on next page)

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What do you expect to find in church each Sunday morning as you arrive for the service? What do you come to church for? And what are your expectations? Jacob was expecting a place to sleep at the particular stage of his journey he'd reached but while he was asleep he had a vivid vision and a dramatic encounter with God himself. And when he woke up, he recognised that God was in that place. It transformed his life. But if you did realise that God was in church, would it make any difference to your attitude and your behaviour? Meeting with God is an awesome thing.

That should inspire our worship. We don't set up an altar as Jacob did, but we should offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise. We have an opportunity to encounter the living, awesome, holy God. We should come expecting to meet God, eager to encounter him in some way, wanting to hear his voice, ready to sense his Holy Spirit.

That should motivate us in our commitment. Jacob met God and then made a vow. It changed his attitude to God and to life. When we encounter God through the work of his Holy Spirit, when we allow our lives to be changed by Jesus, then it should have some transforming effect on our attitudes and should move us forward in our commitment to him.

That should cause us to honour God in all that we do. Jacob used his resources to respond to God. If we knew God was present, would we behave differently?

But if we do get involved in the application of biblical worship to our personal lives – then there are other things that will flow from it. In *1 Corinthians 14* Paul is writing to the Christians at Corinth to give them some advice about how they conduct their worship. Prophecy is an integral part of worship, speaking into situations with an insight that is granted by a real and present God, through his Holy Spirit. Now, says Paul, if that is happening, not only will you – the regular worshippers – benefit from it, but those who are visitors, who don't necessarily know all about the Christian life, will nevertheless sense that there's something special going on and will say "*God is really among you*". That little phrase is actually a quotation from *Zechariah 8:23*. The challenge to us is to live lives of such quality that people say, "There's something going on here. God is involved. I want a bit of what she's got."

If we really believed that God was present when we worship – and expected him to be – if we were really prepared to respond to his awesome presence, it would transform our worship and our evangelism. It would fill us with the same kind of awe that Jacob felt, and that would have an effect on those whom we welcome into our church and whom we meet day by day in our workaday lives.

Questions for discussion

1. How do you prepare for Sunday worship? Do you have an expectation of meeting with the living God?
2. How might God's presence be made real to us?
3. Does Sunday worship help or hinder your encounter with God? How? Why?
4. In the context of Paul's words to the Corinthians, what do you understand prophecy to be?
5. What would we have to change to ensure that we are all aware of God's presence? How might that have an impact on "outsiders"?
6. What are **you** going to do about it? (Don't feel you have to answer this in open discussion.)