

Who is God with?

I'm sure that even the most tentative among us would want to hold a tremulous hand in the air and say, me! I hope God is with me!

That is a lovely response, of course we want to think that God is with us, and with our families; husbands and wives, parents and children, grandchildren, plus all other members. God is with me and my family. And of course, with our friends and those we love and admire. God is with all the people we love.

But once we reach the edge of our personal boundaries, perhaps we are not so sure about the rest of the people in our community, or city or world. We are perhaps more and more unsure the wider the circle becomes, until we are in a situation where we have no idea, who God is with!

And the inverse is also true, others have no idea about us. They look at us, as we look at them, having no idea who God is with.

How horrible is it to be in that vulnerable position of hoping that God is with us, and then to be told by someone else, that in fact as far as they are concerned, God is not with us at all.

Have you ever felt like that?

This is the situation in our text, which comes from Isaiah 56-66, and is about that same question, **who is God with?**

Israel is back home after being exiled in Babylon, and now believe that God is exclusively with them, and that their following of the law keeps it that way. The way they structure their religious activities, who is involved in their religious activities, what they do in their religious activities; keeps God bound to them by the covenants of the past.

But Isaiah 56-66 suggests a different voice. These chapters are from a smaller group, who felt that more freedom in who performed worship; that the welcoming of strangers and those traditionally excluded, was more important than the strictures placed on religious practise by the larger group.

Both groups are in a struggle over the question, **who is God with?** One with a broad and universal outlook; they want to welcome all faithful people to the Temple, irrespective of their ethnicity or physical wholeness. Their opponents had a much narrower view of who is worthy to worship in the temple precinct.

In our text, Isaiah 65:17-25, Israel has formed into these two groups, the community of the nation is broken. The former covenant community is no more. This text says that all previous bets are off, and that God will be doing a new thing. It seems things are so bad, God needs to start again!

This is symbolised by the new heavens and the new earth; you don't get much newer than that. It doesn't literally mean a new heaven and a new earth, but is rather, a powerful symbol of absolute newness. Everything is so wrong; it must all be replaced.

The use of the houses, vineyards and trees imagery, is important as they suggest permanency in the Hebrew mind. This new thing is not part time or short term, but permanent and totally all-encompassing. It will mean people will live all their allotted days, that none will be taken early, all will be blessed with a full and long life.

They will be rewarded for their labour and effort, even enemies will now be friends, except for the serpent. And perhaps best of all, Yahweh will answer them when they call, Yahweh will hear them and be near them. This is what the first testament means when it refers to the idea of salvation, it means that God is near.

So, for this first testament people; smashed up after a deportation and exile in Babylon, after having all their land stolen and their labour swallowed by occupying armies, they are promised this; that their work and effort will be their own, their vineyards and homes will be their own, and they will see out all their days in peace.

They are promised that God will be near them.

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This new heaven and new earth will deliver what life should be like.

This is Salvation.

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As we shape up for advent, we think of one of Jesus, Christmas names; Emmanuel ... God with us.

This is salvation.

Isaiah 65:17-25 says ... this is what it looks like.

So, who is God with?

Our passage from Isaiah suggests God is with those who keep the true sabbath, who perform true fasts. With Levites because they love Yahweh, not because they are born to a particular priestly family. With foreigners and eunuchs, not just the ethnic and physically whole faithful.

Does any of this sound familiar to us these millennia later? Who is it that comes and proclaims God with us? Who is it that comes keeping a true sabbath? Who keeps true fasts? Who declares that heart intent is more important than heritage and lineage? Who is it that comes proclaiming that foreigners and eunuchs, Samaritans and women, children and even sinners ... find their home in the kingdom of God?

Who is Emmanuel; God with us.

Jesus, our Saviour, Friend, and Brother.

So, who is God with?

God is with everyone ... if only we will take the time ... to look, listen ... and see?

Amen.