

Where is God in all this?

Going through the motions of Christianity is no more a guarantee of the presence of God than putting on summer clothes is a guarantee of sunshine.

We can dress in shorts and tee-shirt every day and put on sunglasses every time we go out, but if it has decided to rain buckets then rain it will, and there's nothing we can do about it. It's not traditional summer dress that governs the situation but the meteorological conditions at the time. Good weather can never be taken for granted.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, once discovered that his presence cannot be taken for granted. She'd had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach ever since leaving Jerusalem early that morning. At first it had been just a tiny niggle but, as the day drew to a close, it formed itself into a tight knot of anxiety. Something was wrong.

With a sudden shock she realised she hadn't seen her son for several hours – not, in fact, since leaving Jerusalem, when he had been with the rest of the children. Calling anxiously to her husband to help her, she began running through the campsite and soon the whole place was in a turmoil as relatives

and friends joined them in the search. But Jesus was nowhere to be found.

At last, fearing greatly for their son's safety, they decided to return to Jerusalem and look for him there. After three days they found him safe and sound in the temple courts.

'Why were you searching for me?' he asked in surprise at their questions. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' (Luke 2:49).

Joseph and Mary had done all the right things. Going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, they had been to the right place, at the right time and for the right reasons. They had spent the full length of time there, too - no corner-cutting, no half measures. Surely they could rely on Jesus' presence with them.

They had done everything required of them by law and, leaving Jerusalem, presumed him to be in the caravan. But Jesus wasn't there. He was about his Father's business!

The lesson is obvious: we cannot assume the presence of God just because of what we do and how we do it. We can observe all kinds of rituals and regulations and perform all manner of 'spiritual' obligations, but it is no guarantee that God's presence will be with us.

Mere externals will never guarantee God's approval or oblige him to go along with us and do what we are doing. Even if we have abandoned ritual and regulation in favour of spontaneity in our walk with God, we still can't assume his presence. The real issue is: Are we prepared to go where *God* is going and do what *he* is doing?

Who are you following?

Moses understood this vital principle. Leading the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, he said to God, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will

distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?' (Exodus 33:15-16).

Moses knew there was no point in trying to go somewhere if God wasn't going to be there too. He knew it was the presence of God that made all the difference and guaranteed their success, and he wasn't prepared to go anywhere or do anything if God wasn't with him.

'Well, how do we know when God is with us?' you might ask. 'How does he express his presence with us today?'

Let's have a look at a few personal experiences.

Young Debbie noticed immediately that the people at her new church had a *deep relationship with God* which she hadn't known was possible.

'He was brought into every situation and they treated him like a close friend and Father instead of some far-distant, unreachable being - which had been my previous experience. They didn't sit through the services bored like they did at the old church, singing hymns because that was what they were supposed to do. No, they really worshipped God because they knew him intimately.

'For the first time I experienced the presence of God among his people and it would have been impossible for me to return to my old church after that.'

Laura's experience was similar. The first thing she noticed was the *warm and heartfelt worship* of God. 'And having tasted reality,' she commented, 'we were spoilt for anything else.'

Phil found that at last he had come into contact with a people who *allowed God's Spirit to express the life of God in and through them*. They were letting God transform them into the likeness of his Son. As a result, they were being joined closer together as God strengthened their love for him and for each other and their vision for his kingdom.

They were *seeking God*, both individually and as a body, and the life of God was flowing out of them. They were bringing God's word to the church in *prophecy* (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3) and building each other up with words of *encouragement and*

exhortation (1 Thessalonians 5:11). They were *praying for sick people and seeing them recover* (Mark 16:18) and, as a result of their contacts outside the church, *people were being saved* and the church was growing (Mark 16:15).

These features (among others) signal the presence of God among his people. They should be found in any church where the people, instead of turning their hearts away from God, have welcomed him into their lives and invited him to move freely by his Spirit.

The church, you see, isn't an organisation for political agitation or a 'holy huddle' of escapism from the real world. Neither is it history or traditions, doctrines or ministers, buildings or any other temporal thing.

No. The church is *the demonstrated reality of the presence of God*. It is where the risen Christ demonstrates his presence today in word and works.

And that presence can never be assumed; it must be sought out. We can do little about the weather (except put on warmer clothes and carry an umbrella) but we can, and must, do something about the lack of God in our lives. God is longing for a people like Moses who will seek his presence and be willing to follow him.

How about you? Are you following God, or are you expecting him to follow you?

Don't take God for granted

'Well, I know God is here in this church,' some are likely to say. 'I remember a few years back when a number of people got saved at a mission we held and church membership increased quite considerably. God must be with us.'

No doubt he was. But we can never assume God's presence today just because we knew it yesterday.

Look at Samson, one of the great judges of Israel. He was a man who enjoyed outstanding experiences of God. On three occasions Scripture records that 'the Spirit of the Lord came

upon him in power' (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14).

Set apart for God from his birth, he was chosen to begin rescuing the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines. But he abandoned his vow of separation to the Lord in favour of carnal desires, and eventually he was stripped of his supernatural strength. Discovering that the Philistines had once again come to take him prisoner, he said to himself, 'I'll go out *as before* and shake myself free.' But *he did not know that the Lord had left him*' (Judges 16:20).

What a tragedy that one so mightily used in the past was left just going through the motions!

Another great calamity in Israel's history was the day the Ark of the Covenant was taken captive by the Philistines. The Ark was the symbol of God's covenant with his people and the army of Israel had taken it with them into battle, believing its presence would guarantee them victory.

But the hearts of the people had already turned from obeying God, so he had withdrawn from them – and the external symbol of his presence was no substitute.

After a bloody defeat, the wife of one of the priests who had carried the Ark into battle, hearing of her husband's death and the capture of the Ark, immediately went into labour. As death began to close her own eyes she gave birth to a son whom she named Ichabod (meaning 'No glory'), saying, 'The glory has departed from Israel' (1 Samuel 4:21).

The glory of the Lord had indeed gone. God's presence had vanished because his people had turned their hearts from him. And that's not just a fault of past generations. As one woman commented, explaining her move from a dead church, 'I wanted to go where God was *now*, not where he'd been years before.'

The cocoon left behind when a chrysalis emerges as a beautiful butterfly is no more than an empty shell, the dead relic of a past era. There was life in it once, but no longer. And there is no point in clinging on to the cocoon in the hope that the butterfly will return to it. It can't. Life has developed and the old form can no longer contain it.

So it is with God. The life of God is a dynamic, moving force and as God forges ahead with the outworking of his purposes on earth, he expects us to move with him. But we can't do it unless we let go of the empty shell of mere outward religion and seek the fresh and powerful presence of God.

There are many religious establishments today over which is written the word 'Ichabod'. The 'Philistines' of unbelief have stolen and abused the truth of God, and the Lord has departed. Like the unrepentant church at Ephesus, their lampstand has been removed (Revelation 2:4-5).

The ceremony and ritual, tradition and liturgy, religious practice and observance may continue, but the crucial question remains, 'Where is *God* in all this?'