

Along the track

The Altar

Some months ago I read an article by a priest who was leading a pilgrimage to Thessaloniki in Greece. When he saw in the museum the small marble table from a Roman-era home adorned with carved acanthus leaves and the body of Dionysus, he quite unexpectedly broke down crying. Several months later, while giving a talk in his diocese about Scripture and the Eucharist and discussing these tables, the same thing happened. On reflection, he offered this insight:

I think I've figured it out. I was moved to tears because the ancient polytheists, those whom we often call "pagans," saw God everywhere. God was in every nook and cranny of their lives. God was at the entrance to their homes, in the marketplace, around their hearth, at the gymnasium and at their tables. The doctrine of the real presence in the Eucharist developed in a world where God was everywhere. My Thessaloniki tears flowed at the realization that today, we don't see God anywhere.

Way back then, when people believed in many gods, they erected reminders everywhere, in the streets, in various rooms in their home, where they gathered and worked, in the fields, statues to this or that god, shrines of all sorts of shapes and sizes. They were reminders that the gods were everywhere, an intimate part of their lives. While we may find many of their beliefs and customs to be very, very different, their intuition that God is everywhere highlights how our world is very different.

I wonder what reminders we have? Or is the belief that God is everywhere and in everything a quaint and outmoded belief from the past? It probably is if we can't see God at our own tables, in our comings and goings, in our work and in the poor and in our neighbour, how will we ever see God in the eucharist?

Years ago when I was a teacher I used to help run retreats. The students were asked to reflect on a time when they felt the presence of God. More often than not, it was at the funeral of a grandparent. That's not surprising as that was an event that touched them deeply, that exposed deep emotions and memories. Most of us, I suggest, may have had similar experiences of the presence of God. But is it always at a time of sadness?

Twice a week I drop my granddaughter at school and pick her up in the afternoon. There is usually quite a gathering of parents at the gate in the afternoon. It is a very happy affair as we wait – lots of talking,

other little kids running around in anticipation of their brother or sister coming out of school. I look forward to it. It is a special time, a special gathering. Is God present there in the smiles and the laughter, in the sharing of stories, in the making of connections and friendships?

Now that my family has grown up and left home to explore the four corners of the world, I really miss the evening meal where we were all together. It was a special part of the day where stories were shared, the days events mulled over and dreams were made. It was sometimes a time of conflict, a time to 'sort things out'. Was God present there?

I write *Along the Track* sitting at the front window watching the world go by, and it does. Although I work hard at it, my garden isn't all that good. That is not one of my gifts but I can watch the four seasons come and go, and the weeds that mostly come and don't go. There is a passing parade each day – kids going to school, some with enthusiasm and some with great reluctance. Then there is an array of dogs taking their owners for a walk. Over the last couple of years the passing parade has included more people from other countries and we sometimes meet over the weeds or collecting the mail. Is God present there, in the seasons, the flowers, meeting strangers and friends?

I read recently about a very renowned and famous preacher who was going through a bout of 'preacher's block'. He simply could not find inspiration for an upcoming engagement. Another priest in the monastery came to his room to tell him that a young woman wished to see him. Right at the wrong time! He was busy! With some bad grace, he went to meet her. After their meeting, he wrote, in his words, out of that unwelcome distraction came one of the best sermons of his life. The God of surprises is never predictable!

The prophet Jeremiah (23:23) reminded us: "I am a God who is everywhere and not in one place only." It is worth taking a moment sometimes to ask: where do I find God? Where is God present in my life? Is God in every nook and cranny?

Regards
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