

A Sermon for Evensong

Zechariah 4:1–10 & Revelation 21:1–14 (NRSV), in conversation with Samuel Wells

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening, I want to introduce you to one of my favourite contemporary theologians, Samuel Wells. He is the vicar at St. Martin-in-the-field's in London and the author of over 40 books. There is one theme in particular that consistently runs through many of his books which is very relevant to tonight's readings. Samuel Wells argues that traditional theologians have frequently been captivated by the notion of **"for"** – invariably they see God and Jesus as working or being **"for"** us, dying **for** us, rising **for** us and, he argues, this is both wrong and decidedly unhelpful. It makes our relationship with God a transactional one leading to all sorts of problems. Instead, we need to focus on the more lasting gift of his working **"with"** or ultimately being **"with"** us. As will become apparent, our readings impact very differently through the lens of **"with"** and not **"for"**.

Let us begin with Zechariah. The people are rebuilding the temple after exile. The task feels fragile, uncertain, and small. Into this, God speaks:

"Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts."

(Zechariah 4:6, NRSV)

We often hear this as reassurance that God will act *for* us—achieving what we cannot. Certainly, that is the traditional historical theological position. Samuel Wells invites us to hear something deeper: God's Spirit is not simply a force applied on our behalf, but the very presence of God *with* us in the work itself.

In his book *God's Companions*, Wells reflects on how God's primary desire is not to fix things from a distance but to accompany us—to be alongside us in our vulnerability, our incompleteness, our "day of small things."

And so that phrase from Zechariah takes on new depth:

"For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice..." (Zechariah 4:10, NRSV)

Why should we not despise small things? Not because they will one day become impressive, but because God is already present within them.

God is with us in the small congregation, the quiet prayer, the unnoticed kindness. The Spirit is not waiting for greatness; the Spirit dwells in the ordinary.

Too often we imagine God as one who steps in dramatically—solving, rescuing, intervening. But it's this that can so easily become a source of tension

whenever we feel that God went AWOL and didn't answer our calls or did not prevent some deadfall calamity from hurting us.

The vision of Zechariah suggests something gentler and more enduring: a lamp continually fed with oil, a steady, sustaining presence.

God with us.

And this brings us to Revelation.

John's vision is often read as a promise of what God will do *for* us at the end of time. But again, notice the emphasis:

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” (Revelation 21:3, NRSV)

The fulfilment of all things is not simply relief from suffering, but relationship—God dwelling with humanity.

In another of Well's books, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Wells explores how the life of Jesus reveals this very pattern: God does not stand apart, dispensing solutions, but enters fully into human life—sharing meals, forming friendships, walking alongside others. Salvation, in this vision, is not merely rescue but presence. The cross is not a sacrifice that appeases God's righteous wrath or a conquest that defeats our last enemy. It's a vision of a God whose purpose is to be with us more intimately, more permanently, more comprehensively than we can imagine. God is so committed to be with us, that Christ is willing to endure even crucifixion to embody that ultimate commitment to be **with**,

So when Revelation continues:

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...” (Revelation 21:4, NRSV)

we are not simply being told that suffering will be removed, but that God will be *with us* in such a complete way that all that diminishes life is overcome by that presence. There will be nothing left for God to do for us, we shall fully be God's companions. God is with us through the very worst of life and in the very separation of death – in, through, and beyond.

The theology of “with” insists that **the method** and **goal** of God in creation, incarnation, and salvation are the same.

So what does this mean for us, here, at Evensong?

It means that our hope is not only that God will act *for* us in the future, but that God is already *with* us in the present.

With us in the small things.
With us in the unfinished work.
With us in our joys and in our sorrows.

It means that prayer is not merely asking God to do things, but becoming attentive to God's presence.

It means that the Church is not simply a place where things get fixed, but a community learning to be with God and with one another.

And it means that when we face difficulty or uncertainty, we are not waiting for God to arrive—God is already here.

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit.”

“See, the home of God is among mortals.”

These are not separate messages. They are one: God's Spirit is God's presence, and that presence is with us now, even as it draws us toward the fullness of the new creation.

So let us not despise the day of small things. For in those small things, God is with us.

Let us not imagine that salvation lies only ahead of us. For even now, God dwells among us.

And as we go from this place tonight, into the quiet of the evening, may we become more aware of that presence—beside us, within us, among us.

Not God *for us*.
But God *with us*.

Amen.