

St German's Cathedral, 18th December 2022

Readings: Is 7 10-16; Matt 1 18-end

Emanuel – God with us

It may still be a week before Christmas, but today our Gospel reading encapsulates the whole Christmas story. It sets the scene of Mary's pregnancy, hints at Joseph's disquiet but stresses his concern for Mary as he looked for ways to reduce her shame. It confirms the extraordinary pregnancy through the intervention of an angel who tells Joseph that Mary will have a son, who should be named Jesus. The angel outlines the purpose of the incarnation: *he will save his people from their sins*, and he links their current situation back to a prophecy given some 700 years before. The angel also give Joseph another insight into the miraculous – others would call the child Immanuel = God with us.

We are familiar with the story which has been retold countless times in locations all over the world over a period of two thousand years. But to live through it must have been extraordinary. Everyone knows that sex has to come before pregnancy so it is no wonder that Joseph was angry and Mary misunderstood. For Mary, the precious moment when she said Yes to the angel and experienced the power of the most high overshadowing her, was tarnished by the lack of understanding, the reactions of those around her and the disgrace experienced by her family.

The idea of their new-born son saving people from their sins must have been very difficult to fathom and many times Mary and Joseph must have wondered if God was really with them. And I suspect that most of us at some stage will have questioned whether God is with us. When life is really difficult it doesn't feel as though God is with us. At such times we need to separate our emotions from our innate knowledge and faith. Jesus never promised his followers a problem free life. Indeed he calls us to take up our cross to follow him and in Luke's gospel he says: *So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple* (14:33). But he doesn't abandon us. As we have sung in the Psalm (27): *Whom shall I fear? for my light and my help is the Lord*

The Bible has numerous examples of God's promise to be with us in different circumstances. When Joshua was taking over the leadership of the Israelites from Moses, God said to him:

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9) That promise was not just for Joshua. If you are facing a potential change of location, then this is a promise for you too. The Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Are you facing a situation where you feel weak? Or maybe where you're expected to go with the flow and lose your integrity. Here's some encouragement from Isaiah (41:10):

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Or maybe you're concerned about your responsibility for sharing your faith and you're not sure what to do. At the end of Matthew's gospel we read how Jesus commissioned his disciples to make disciples, baptising them and teaching them (28:20): The Gospel ends with the words: *And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

And what about the challenges many are facing of inflation and the increased cost of heating bills? In the book of Hebrews Paul writes: *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he – that is God – has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* (13:5). As the people of God we need to support each other in these difficult times, remembering how the early church had everything in common. They sold their possessions to give to anyone as they had need (Acts 2:44-5).

For many of us one of the most difficult things to face is death – that of a family member, a friend, a neighbour or a diagnosis for ourselves of a life-limiting illness. The familiar words of Psalm 23 should flow around us in comfort: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me* (23: 4). And in Romans we read:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:38-9).

Last week Nigel mentioned John of the Cross, known for the phrase “the dark night of the soul”. *Carolyn Joyce Carty* expressed the conundrum of faith versus experience very eloquently in her poem *Footsteps in the Sand*:

“LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you’d walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don’t understand why when
I needed you most you would leave me.”

The LORD replied:

“My son, my daughter, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you.”

God is truly with us in all those difficult times when we are so caught up in survival that we cannot sense His presence.

The Christmas message of a child being born, of God becoming flesh and choosing to dwell with us, of Immanuel, God with us, is true not just for a few weeks in December, but throughout the year. The Church’s New Year began 3 weeks ago with the first Sunday in Advent.

The four candles on our Advent wreath remind us of hope, love, joy and peace. They also help us with our Advent journey of penitence and preparation. The first candle is for the people of God, the second for the old testament prophets, the third for John The Baptist and the fourth for Mary. Today we acknowledge Mary’s key role in our faith. In a few moments as we receive communion, Christians will be singing a version of Ave Maria. It’s in Latin and begins with the greeting of the Angel Gabriel: *Greetings you who are highly favoured! **The Lord is with you.*** Mary couldn’t have known all that would follow from her positive response to the angel’s message. There must have been much joy, but also much pain.

In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, there’s another well-known verse made popular by a painting by William Holman Hunt. The painting shows Jesus holding a lamp, knocking on a door that looks as if it hasn’t been opened in a while – it has plants growing up it. There is no handle on the outside. The verse reads: Behold I stand at the door and knock; If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (3:20). I wonder if he is knocking at your door today. Are you ready to open it, to let him in, to let him share your life with you?

In a few moments we will be sharing in the bread and wine. Christ’s body and blood. This is a tangible act. A welcoming of the Christ child – and the crucified saviour – into our bodies and lives.

I pray that this Christmas you may rediscover the presence of Christ. That you will see Him in the fun of shared presents and food. That you will see him in the pain of the lonely and the victims in news items. That you will see him in the beauty of creation. That you will see him in the carols and church services. And if you face difficult circumstances, you will look over your shoulder and see the single line of footsteps and give thanks that in the time of trial and suffering Christ was indeed carrying you.

Amen.

Rosemary Clarke, December 2022