

Christmas Day Service
25th December 2023
Immanuel—God with us!

Last week as I was pondering what to say on Christmas Day a news item came up, home page. In normal times Bethlehem is very busy in late December but the war has put an end to tourism and thrown a sad shadow across the town. One church leader has taken a baby doll representing infant Jesus and scattered the rubble of broken homes all around the doll.

Did anyone else see this? Political message aside, it's quite a profound gesture, placing a doll representing Jesus among the residue of war. Because one of the names Jesus was given is "Immanuel" which means "God with us:" God with us in our joys and God with us when our hearts are broken. I'd like us to meditate on the name "Immanuel" for just a few moments this Christmas morning, *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God with us."* Matthew 1:23.

The name "Immanuel" expresses the longing of God's heart throughout history

God has always wanted to dwell with mankind! It is a wonder and a mystery, for why should God, "Creator of the rolling spheres ineffably sublime" be mindful of us? But there, right at the dawn of human history God walked with Adam and Eve "in the Garden in the cool of the day." (Genesis 3:8) We would like to know exactly what that meant, was it for example a theophany, the appearance of God in human form or a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ? We don't know!

But what did Adam and Eve, who represent all of us, do? They disobeyed God. "My life, my rules," as I saw it on a camper van this week. And as a consequence of their rebellion God could no longer dwell with them and they were cast out of the Garden, out of the presence of God. But here is the great marvel, God did not give up on them but continued to desire to dwell with them...

And so God gathered together a nation to himself, the descendants of Abraham, the twelve tribes of Israel,. And when they were wandering in the desert he told them to

make a great tent for him, a tabernacle, in which he would dwell. They parked it right in the middle of their own tents. And in a little room called the holy of holies 30' x 30' x 30' right at the centre of the tabernacle God dwelled—only symbolically of course—because God cannot live in buildings, human hands. The tabernacle represented the longing of God to dwell with the people he made.

And then when Israel came into possession of the promised land they were commanded to build a stone version of the tabernacle.

But there was a difference between the Garden of Eden and the Tabernacle or the Temple because of sin: the way to God's presence was barred—only the high priest and only once a year and only with the blood of a sacrificial animal could he come into God's presence. This was teaching us that since you and I are sinners and rebels, we can no longer come into God's presence unless our sins have been paid for. God wants to dwell with us!—he loves us!—but our wrongdoing must be paid for first.

And then in the fullness of time, God came to dwell in the world, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, Immanuel. This is what Christmas Day remembers - God coming to earth to dwell among us, as fantastical as it might seem the first time we hear it.

At the end of his earthly life Jesus sacrificed himself to pay for our sins, by suffering death on a cross, so that we can be forgiven and live forever one day in the glorious presence of God in a renewed heavens and earth.

Which takes us all the way to the end of time; to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, where we find this longing of God to be with us fulfilled in heaven: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4)

So can you see, the word “Immanuel” “God with us,” describes the yearning in God's heart to dwell with his people from the beginning of time to the end? A love so intense that God is prepared to send his Son to suffer death on a cruel cross so that rebel sinners can be restored to fellowship with him.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who does not know that God loves you! Perhaps this is news to you! “You are loved by God!”

(2) Immanuel explains the desire of every human soul

Our second Christmas Day reflection is this: “Immanuel explains the desire of every human soul though it knows it not.

In nature we discover symbiotic relationships between living things: two creatures who need and depend on each other. A well-known one is the relationship, ever since the film *Finding Nemo*, between clown fish (Nemo) and sea anemones. They need, protect one another.

In a similar way, though God does not need us, You and I designed to know God, to love him, to worship him, and to find in him our deepest happiness and our highest joy. But ever since we have walked out on God, we seek happiness in a thousand other places—even though none of them can fill our empty hearts.

In the 300s Augustine described the desire of every human heart like this: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our *heart is restless* until it rests in you.”

In the 1600s Blaise Pascal put it like this, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

And in the last century, one of our own prophets, CS Lewis, “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when *infinite joy is offered us*, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

This word Immanuel, not only expresses the longing of God's heart through all of time, it also explains the desire of every human heart, though it knows it not.

So may I ask you at this Christmas time, where do you find your highest joys? It's a judicious question at this time of the year, is it not, because people pursue happiness in feasting, friendship, families and fun. Only God can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

And finally, on this Christmas Day,

(3) The word "Immanuel" provides comfort to all of God's children

Christmas Day is filled with sorrows for many folks:

- Someone is missing around the table this year
- A strained or broken family relationship
- A severe illness
- Loneliness
- And in other lands around the world, war, famine, disease, persecution.

"Immanuel" reminds us that God has lived in this broken world and has experienced bereavement, mental anguish, betrayal, temptation, rejection, poverty, physical agony, aloneness and every other sort of hardship. On heaven's throne—even on this Christmas morning - sits the Man Christ Jesus, who can sympathise with us in our sorrows, because he has dwelt among us.

"What a friend we have in Jesus.

All our sins and griefs to bear.

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!"

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

So whatever our joys are sorrows, we have one in heaven who will both understand and welcome us today.

On this Christmas morn may the Lord help us to understand that this glorious name given to Jesus, "Immanuel", "God with us" expresses the eternal love and longing of God's heart to dwell with the people he created; explains the longing of every human heart, though it may know it not; and provides comfort for every suffering saint for in heaven there sits our sympathising Saviour who has dwelt among us and experienced all our sorrows as well as our joys.