

The simple message of Immanuel

The carols relate a simple story. Once in Royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for a bed. Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child. An ordinary couple, a cattle shed, a mother mild, a manger, a little child – all simple symbols of Christmas.

The story is, of course, more complex than this. In our Gospel we are introduced to an early trauma. The angel said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife" (NIV). But Joseph was afraid. He wanted out. He was afraid for Mary and her public disgrace. He was afraid that his world and that of Mary's would soon fall apart. Joseph was determined to divorce Mary. We are not told of Mary's reaction to the news. We do not know whether she screamed or was silent; wept or smiled; whether she sat motionless or danced for joy. Both Joseph and Mary would surely have been shocked at the news. We do know that Mary asks, simply: How can this be, since I am a virgin? In contrast Joseph seems to panic and plans a divorce, In Joseph we saw a distraught man, wondering what he had done to deserve this, wondering where this is all leading. Perhaps he did panic, not helped, probably, by his traditional view of a detached God, interfering in his life, a life he had nicely mapped out – engagement, marriage and his own children. Panic! Divorce! All because of Mary, the girl he loved so much. The clouds of confusion may not have lifted completely even after the angel's message, especially after months of agonizing doubt. I am sure he wasn't thinking clearly enough to take in 'Immanuel'.

God had other ideas. Joseph received God's promise in faith. He put aside plans to divorce Mary; frightening circumstances of the night when he was told the news fading away to be replaced by different challenges to come.

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (NIV). The Gospel of Matthew directs us to fulfillment of this prophecy, in the forthcoming birth of Jesus, a prophecy we hear about in Isaiah, Chapter 7. The seal is set on God's promise, made through Isaiah, to Ahaz way back in the Old Testament. The background and context to God's promise to Mary and Joseph may be complex, over a long time frame, but the message remains simple: 'Immanuel'

Mary and Joseph were the first to hear and accept what Isaiah had foretold to King Ahaz. At the time King Ahaz didn't listen. God invites King Ahaz to ask for a sign, any sign, but he refuses, saying: 'I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test.' God loses patience and gives Ahaz a sign anyway, the sign of Immanuel, a sign of salvation, a sign of God's power to save. It is a security for every promise even when our faith fails. The news of the birth of Christ reveals the persistence of our God who knows how we struggle with faith and will give any sign, any grace, to help us believe and live out our faith.

This simplicity does get lost in our crowded diaries and our rush towards Christmas. We can overwhelm and overextend ourselves, not only in terms of finances but also in time and energy. I am reminded of one doting father asking his small daughter well in advance what she would like for Christmas. Shyly she announced that she would like a baby brother. To everyone's surprise and delight her mother returned from hospital on Christmas Eve with a baby boy in her arms. When the father repeated the question next year, there was less hesitation. "If it wouldn't be too uncomfortable for Mummy I would like a pony!" We do tend to complicate Christmas and rush towards the celebrations

often frustrated and tired. We are often not in a position to contemplate the simple yet extremely challenging message. Yet whether we do or do not contemplate it, the message remains and remains simple: 'Immanuel'.

The message is beautifully illustrated by the true story of a young orphan boy, living in the orphanage. For the first time he was to spend Christmas away from the orphanage. On arriving at the home where he was to spend Christmas he was so scared he rushed into the bedroom and crawled under the bed. He refused to move however much the family he was staying with called, pleaded, encouraged him to come out and join them. The mum could have, of course, got hold of him and dragged him out but that wasn't her way. She wanted the boy to feel safe enough to come out from under the bed himself. After a while and in some desperation, Mum laid down flat on the floor and squeezed under the bed, so she could lay alongside the frightened boy. She lay there holding his hand. That was enough. The boy knew that this mum could and would meet him at his level and lie beside him, down there, underneath the bed. With that he came out from under the bed and joined the family for Christmas.

In the baby Jesus, God comes to our level, willing to lie by our side, so to speak. So simple! Yet the simple message poses a huge challenge! We are fortunate to stand with Joseph here. For we too have been shown the fulfillment of the promise. Jesus was born. He is 'God with us'. He then was crucified, buried and was raised from the dead. And through his Holy Spirit, he remains 'God with us'. God with us where we are!

Our challenge is in our reaction to 'Immanuel', where we are now. The message of Christmas is punctured with different reactions. We have mentioned that of Mary and Joseph, but what about the reaction of Herod and the innkeeper, for example. Herod wanted the baby, Jesus, destroyed because he was a threat; the innkeeper had no room for the baby, Jesus, and found it an inconvenient irrelevance. Simeon's reaction was different. At the temple he says: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2: 30-32 NIV)." This is the reaction God wants us to have.

Christmas can never be seen as part of a predictable routine. It does not come ready packaged and unchangeable, something thrown at us whether we like it or not, something to get through! What a pity to waste the opportunity it brings!

Every year, for everyone, Christmas is different. I know quite a few people, for whom, for a variety of reasons, Christmas is going to be difficult this year; for some, very difficult. We all approach Christmas in different ways, with different emotions and experiences. From wherever we are coming this Christmas, whatever kind of year we have had, hopefully we can 'open our eyes too and see God's salvation which he has prepared in the sight of all nations.' Our challenge is: are we prepared to accept Immanuel, 'God is with us'; prepared to light up our Christmas and our life simply by knowing that God is with us, welcoming him into our lives as we struggle with faith, not just this Christmas but for the rest of our lives.

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