

24th December 2016 Christmas Eve Communion
Isaiah 7.1-14
Matthew 1.18-24

The God Called Immanuel

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

In my final college year I shared a house with Philip – since then he and his wife have worked in churches as far apart as Leeds and Zimbabwe. When he and Gill were expecting their first child they wrote to us from Africa wondering what name they might give this longed for addition to their family. And the family this little one was being born into had the rather unusual surname of Igoe. Philip, always one for a quip, pondered the possibilities – for a girl, he wrote, perhaps we could call her Mary Lee Igoe – or for a boy how about Ernest Leigh Igoe. Well when she arrived I was disappointed – but not surprised, to hear she simply been given the name Sarah.

Choosing a name for a child – it's one of those decisions that have long-term implications. Our boys chuckle when we tell them what they would have been called if they had been girls. Personally I can't see what's wrong with Esmerelda.

At this time of year we hear again that one name appropriated to the Christ Child was that of Immanuel. I sense that we value the idea behind that name –

Immanuel a Jewish name with the meaning – God is with us.

Churches in our tradition don't usually name their buildings and congregations anything other than by the street or town in which we are placed. But a few churches break out of the mould – so in High Wycombe and Slough you bump in Trinity URCs, and in Southsea where I used to preach- an Immanuel Baptist Church.

But I wonder how many of us realise when this name first became popular and why?

It comes originally from Isaiah – and no prophet seems to be read more than him at Christmas – and chapter 7 verse 14: ...the Lord himself will give you a sign, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Now those words were uttered 700 years before Jesus was born at Bethlehem. So initially, at any rate, they were not about him.

Seven centuries before a star hovered over a stable Israel found herself on the losing side of many wars. The nation was hemmed in and desperate. And no one was more desperate than the King, Ahaz. His kingdom and throne looked doomed. To save his neck he thought the only way out was to form an alliance with Assyria – at that time considered to be a godless and pagan nation. Isaiah was, if you like, Ahaz's Archbishop of Canterbury and he called often at the Palace.

He came this day with an odd sermon in his pocket. After listening to the King's desperation and hearing that a disastrous alliance with Assyria was being planned, Isaiah said to Ahaz – You know women are giving birth to children in your kingdom, and do you know what they are calling their sons – why they are giving them the name Immanuel. Immanuel – meaning God is with us.

Sometimes when the arguments for or against an action are so complicated, sometimes when the discussions go round in circles – an illustration – a simple observation can cut through the fog of despair. That was Isaiah's intention.

He wanted to show Ahaz that many in his kingdom still had faith in Yahweh – still had hope in their hearts. These folks didn't believe in a coalition with Assyria – instead they based confidence in God – who they believed was still with them – and to demonstrate that trust and proclaim it, they called their children Immanuel.

Alas Ahaz didn't listen to Isaiah – he joined forces with pagan Assyria and eventually the nation crumbled away and an exile began.

Seven hundred years begin and end and these words of Isaiah are remembered once more – in a dream given to a desperate Joseph.

Joseph was desperate because he believed his marriage to Mary was threatened. She was expecting a child and he knew he wasn't the father. Initially their relationship went through a very bleak time. Confusion and suspicion filled his mind – we only guess how Mary felt.

In Joseph's day the news that Mary was expecting seemed at first like a disaster. They were formally engaged but not yet legally married. In that male dominated and domineering world he knew of only two options. He could legally separate from her – a sort of mini divorce (today we might call it simply breaking off the engagement) –or he could submit her case to the village elders with the certain outcome that she would have been stoned. It was – at least for women – a barbaric era. How could it all have gone so wrong for Mary and Joseph?

What a choice – divorce or stoning. Joseph chose the former and then went to bed.

Well Freud wasn't the first person to attach value to dreams – they figure highly in some bible stories too - and both the Joseph of the Old Testament and his namesake in the New have life changing dreams – and in these dreams God speaks to them and gives them a direction for the future.

That night as he slept Joseph hears the angel's reassurance – Mary is to bear the Son of God – no one is more faithful than her. The dream ends with a quotation from Isaiah 7: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel - which means, God is with us.

Slowly – perhaps painfully, perhaps with shame that he ever doubted her or intended to separate from her – Joseph begins to understand Mary's announcement and its significance.

Like most of us – it has taken him some time to understand and get used to God’s ways.

This, then is the story of a God called Immanuel.

On this Christmas Eve we come to church as the year ends and there is a certain lack of confidence in the air.

Referendums and elections are changing the political landscape all around us. Michelle Obama spoke last month of an America without Hope.

Tonight we gather in church and we hear scriptures that speak of the hope called Immanuel.

We offer prayers for our world to a God whose perspective and power is so much greater than ours – and our hearts glimpse hope.

We sing carols that express poetically the wonder-filled idea that we are not alone but that God has come alongside us in the baby of Bethlehem and our hearts are warmed by the hopeful assurance that God shares life with us.

And as the clock turns midnight and we slip together into Christmas morning we eat a piece of bread and drink a cup of wine and our experience of the world can once more be healed and transformed by the hope that God’s light is stronger than darkness and God’s love is stronger than hate.

700 years before Christ a holy man of God stood before a

King who was making a disastrous political alliance and he shamed his monarch with the news that as babies were being born around his kingdom that night hundreds of parents were calling their sons Immanuel because they, unlike their king, still held hope in their hearts that God was with them.

Tonight we too celebrate the birth of a baby called Immanuel – and we too can face the dawn of Christmas Day with this hope in our hearts – that God is with us – that his light guides us on our pilgrimage and his love inspires our journey. And with such light and love – there is surely hope this Christmas for us, our family and friends, our neighbourhood and nation and indeed for the whole world.

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

Ian Green Amersham 21st December 2016