



Come Emmanuel, God with us

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 7. 10-16; Matthew 1. 18-end

A conversation overheard in the snow at the crib in the Square (designed by Tomoaki Suzuki) the other evening as three young women, out for the night, came peering through the glass at the warmth of the lit nativity scene before them: 'Who's that lying down? It must be Joseph. It's like he's sunbathing on the beach or something.' The reply; 'I don't know what he's doing lying down, all relaxed, it's her that should be lying down, (pointing to Mary kneeling in adoration), she's the one that's been doing all the work!' They burst out laughing, others join in around them. Laughing knowingly about relationships and partnerships and life.

Our Gospel reading today of the birth of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel is told through the actions of Joseph. Mary who we traditionally turn to on this fourth Advent Sunday is distinctly in the background. In this account it is Joseph's annunciation, his visit from the angel and his decisions and obedience that take centre stage. It invites us to remember that Jesus came to us, wrapped within the life and obedience of an ordinary couple and partnership – to Mary *and* Joseph. And Matthew's account is preceded in the beginning of the chapter by the layering of partnerships, as the genealogy of Jesus is recounted, generation by generation Jesus' life running like a thread of hope and promise through the ordinary and complex relationships and the life and history of the people of Israel.

The details of the birth story, so vividly brought to life in the manger and stable, the shepherds and singing angels of Luke's account, depicted so beautifully in the crib outside, are nowhere to be seen. Jesus' actual birth comes just at the end of the chapter, almost in parenthesis. Matthew pares away the details to get to the 'who' of Christ. His account, with Joseph as the central character, focuses on Jesus' conception and naming. Who he is and what he is to do, and draws us to do the same, to set aside cribs and angels and shepherds.

By being so clear and almost labouring the point, that Joseph has no part in this conception, Matthew is keen to stress that this birth is completely 'of God'. In the long list of names of the genealogy, Jesus' name is a new name. In Jesus he breaks into the midst of our relationships and life and history to make all things new. He is truly with us - the new way for God to be with his people, promised for so long. It requires fresh understanding. The name he is given also describes his role, *how* he will be with his people. As Jesus, the Saviour, in his life and ministry, and in his death and resurrection he comes to free us and save us with his love and peace and forgiveness. He is the description of the way God longs to be with his people *and* the life he brings them. He is Messiah, Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us. Hope and peace, love and forgiveness for all the world.

In this most Jewish of the Gospels, Matthew often refers to specific texts of the Hebrew Scriptures to show that Jesus' life is embedded in and a fulfilment of the promise given to his people. This reference to chapter seven of Isaiah is just one of several in this birth story.

*All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken of by the Lord through the prophet:
Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
And they shall name him Emmanuel.
Which means God is with us.¹*

It is a reference to the sign given by the prophet Isaiah in the 8th century before Christ's birth, to Ahaz, King of Judah, as he trembles at the thought of the powerful armies of Israel and Syria that are amassing on his northern borders. It is a sign of promise intended to assure him of God's presence with him and his people in the immediacy of the crisis he is facing. Matthew takes this sign, that speaks to a particular time and place in history, and reveals within it the story of Jesus. It is a fresh understanding of the scriptures for his Jewish Christian community.

The symbol of mother and child is a reflection of God's strength in weakness, speaking to and overcoming power. Before a child about to be born to a young pregnant woman has reached the age of moral awareness, all that Ahaz now fears will have passed. Naming him Emmanuel, God is with us, is a sign for Ahaz that God is present with them in all that they face. The name contrasting to his own lack of trust in refusing even to ask for a sign himself.

In Matthew's fulfilment prophecy the woman is not pregnant but is yet to conceive: '*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son*', and these words have been the cause of much controversy and debate in the church over the centuries. Is Matthew taking and reworking passages like this one from Isaiah out of context to fill them with meaning of the promise of a coming Messiah that was never intended?

In Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's book '*The First Christmas*', the Vicar's book of the month for December, they suggest that 'as someone speaking to a Jewish Christian community who already believe that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, he is not doing this to convince others, but to draw from the scriptures what is already planted there.'

'We do not assume that Matthew was trying to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. For Matthew and his community, Jesus was the Messiah... As such he was the fulfilment of God's promise and Israel's yearning. To express this Matthew mined the Old Testament, the sacred scripture of his community, for passages he could integrate into his narrative, seeing the story of Jesus 'prefigured' there.'²

He doesn't rework the sign for Ahaz to take it out of its context but brings new life into it to reflect the new understanding that Jesus' birth has brought. It is an affirmation of the faith of his community, not a distortion of history to prove his point.

In the last words of the Gospel we hear again of Jesus as Emmanuel - God with us. 'I am with you always, to the end of the age'.³ In these words to his disciples, as he encourages them to go and take the good news of the life of Christ to all the world, there is the affirmation that this presence of God in Christ lives on in and with the church, giving life and inspiration in the midst of community. Jesus is born and lives among us *and* remains with us.

The birth of Christ that we prepare for is about being aware of this presence, of God with us, in new and surprising ways. Coming in what appears to be weakness, in the midst of our life and relationships. It may be through a need to rely on others in illness, or care for those amongst us who need our support, of an unexpected change in the pattern of our work that we hadn't

¹ Matthew 1.27

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas*, SPCK, 2008, p.210

³ Matthew 28.20

anticipated, in new things placed upon us and our families. Jesus comes to be born among us and between us. Between us in our friendships and partners, between us and all those we are close to and know, between strangers and enemies and amongst those who are estranged. His message of strength in weakness speaks to our self sufficiency, his forgiveness comes in new and surprising ways to our hardness of heart.

It is not just a baby that we expect, or a historical story retold, but a whole new way of life we are waiting for; new things coming to birth in us, new ways for God to be with us. Familiar ways broken down and redirected, in our patterns of behaviour and thinking and expectations. It is a whole new life we are waiting for, a whole new way of knowing and believing that God is with us.

There is a wedding taking place here in church this week. It is unusual to have one so close to Christmas, but it reminds us that Christ comes and is born in the midst of all that we are, in the midst of our relationships and partnerships, our hopes and expectations of one another.

The women and others who gathered at the crib the other evening, wondered and commented at the figures. One thought that one of the kings looked like her dad. Their observations and laughter brought it to life. The story of Christ's birth becomes real for us when we are part of it and enter into it and open our lives for God to really be with us.

As we draw near to the crib, to the life of God with us, we ponder again the life that is so familiar and is also so new and strange. Like Joseph and Mary we offer our trust and faith and obedience to his ways and his will for new life to spring up and come in. For Christ to be born in us.