

Immanuel 'God with us'

In December we are looking at the Christmas theme of Immanuel, meaning 'God with us'.

Sometimes it may be difficult to know for ourselves what it is to have God with us, but we have it written down for us from people who met Jesus. We are going to look at the account from Luke, someone who knew the followers of Jesus, and indeed his Mum, a lady called Mary. Mary is someone who knew what it was like having God with her, Jesus with her, she brought him up on this earth, so let's have a look at her experience of 'God with us'.

Luke 1

'In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.'

Now Mary was probably a teenage girl, her life was very planned out for her. She was going to get married, she was going to marry a man who she quite probably not even met yet, his name was Joseph, she would meet him quite probably on her wedding day.

We can imagine the wedding day is a bit like; this is Joseph, this is Mary, we don't know if you love each other or not but you will have to work that out, you will get married, we expect you to have children and then your parents can be proud grandparents, and if you live long enough you may even get to meet your own grandchildren, then you will die. A normal life in a dusty small town for a girl named Mary.

But God in this period of History had decided that this was the time when the Earth would again experience 'God with us' as someone once again we could walk and talk with, to remind you and remind me that God is a God who gets involved and is involved. God radically changed Mary's life.

The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'
Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

In other words, "are you a Jedi?" - just messing.

Imagine how overwhelming the presence of an angel was for Mary or would be for us. The angel says 'don't be afraid', why - because she was scared to death and the angel wants to get over that fear so the good news can be shared.

But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.'

There is something here we can grasp hold of, in the presence of the angel, someone sent from God, Mary is afraid, the Shepherds are the same when they are told about the birth of Jesus. So when God is with us, when God is close, we may feel afraid.

In the presence of God we need to be obedient to the command 'do not be afraid', and then we can hear what God has for us. It is important in moments of fear to realise how weak fear is, as soon as we press through, obey this command 'do not be afraid' - fear goes because God does not want us to stay there.

We can take comfort because in a place of fear it can be a place very, very close to God - do not be afraid, you have found favour with God.

Mary obeyed the command Now look how certain these next statements are that the Angel gives to Mary;

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

There is a very big statement 'His Kingdom will never end', the Nation of Israel has not had an independent Kingdom for 500 years, and you are telling me this son of mine will have a Kingdom that never ends, who would believe that, who could believe that, I am just a teenage girl who will have a son, who will grow up and have some kids, I'll die, he'll die and no one will ever know we ever existed, but at this moment Mary was not worried about the Kingdom word she was worried about something else, I think Mary didn't hear much beyond 'you will conceive and give birth to a son', but I like her pragmatic response and she was not asking from a place of fear, she had accepted the 'God is with her'.

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

And then according to Luke who was writing in a language that is not spoken by Mary and the Angel, Luke chooses words that are difficult, that preachers and theologians skip over, because you don't want to pause too long in this part of the story, because honestly it gets a weird, but Mary asks the question that any teenage girl would ask, when told you were going to have a baby while remaining a virgin. So very delicately, I suppose..

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'

Mary, teenage girl, you are going to have a son and here is what his reputation is going to be? Son of God. God is with you, your life is going to change.

God is with her: your Son will have the reputation of the Son of God

Even though God is with her she still has to contend with: people's judgement of Mary, pregnant and not married, will her fiancé leave her?

I love the way God provides for Mary here, someone who can understand, someone to walk alongside:

Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'

Even though God is with Elizabeth she has been unable to conceive, judged by people around her - what has she done wrong, now Elizabeth is pregnant.

Then we suppose that Mary's life got back to normal.

However, Mary's life got back to sub-normal, because the angel went away and from what we are told and what Luke discovered, and it is more than likely that Luke interviewed Mary because John was taking care of Mary at this time. According to Mary and according to the historical record the Angel Gabriel never showed up to Mary again, but it bet she wished that the angel had, because all of a sudden her life got very complicated.

Mary is a pregnant teenage girl with no explanation to why she was pregnant, and I imagine there were days when Mary was 'angel, angel, angel, you need to come down here and explain a few things again, to my parents, the people in the village, the teachers, because they are looking at me funny. I am not about to tell them I need an explanation, but eventually she met up with Joseph and fortunately he had a heads up about what was going on and he stuck by her.

Joseph - we need more men like Joseph, I need to be a man more like Joseph. Men who listen for God, hear from God and walk in obedience with God, respect and honour women, bring up their children in a Godly way.

It could have been very different here, but Joseph chose the way of God and trusted that God was with him.

Then, talk about bad timing, Ceaser Augustus decrees that everyone must go home and register for a census and Joseph goes to Mary and says I have bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is that you have to go with me to Bethlehem and the really bad news is that the best way I can get you there is by Donkey. Do you think Joseph came out with some reassuring lines of 'it should be fine, I will put an extra blanket on the Donkey, that should make it bearable', maybe he wisely avoided that - might have been wise.

This happens to Mary who is favoured of God, she takes a pre-natal donkey ride for almost 120 miles. It takes them so long to get there, you know the story, that when they get there, there is no room at the Inn. I wonder if Mary thought about maybe she should have put some terms and conditions in place with the angel - maybe?

Mary's story continues to deteriorate, we can ask why would God allow that to happen, why would God allow that to happen?, why in the world would god allow that to happen? Then Joseph hears from God again that Herod has found out a King has been born, and Herod is angry, Herod is jealous, Herod is insecure.

God is with us: A king, a saviour, God is with us, Jesus is born
Herod is ignoring God: A king - jealous, insecure, enjoying power

We come to that tragic part of the Christmas story and we can't pause and think about for very long, it puts us off our lunch, it is so unsettling, it has the ability to overpower all of the romance that we associate with Christmas.

Early one morning as people were getting ready for another day Herod's soldiers showed up at the edge of town and they went through the city where they believed the new King lived and they slaughtered every single, child who was two years old and younger, in a senseless, purposeless expression of jealousy.

For the rest of her life Mary knew that even though her husband was warned by God and they saved their child by fleeing 200 miles to Egypt, God did not seem to save those little children from that little town, what's the purpose of that? what was the point of that? I don't know - but it is not of God, it is rooted in jealousy, insecurity and power seeking.

The problem was, the Roman soldiers did get Jesus in the end, although I doubt any had linked the two instances until Luke documented this, and Mary was there to witness it in all it's horror. Mary watched her son die, crucified on the cross.

This is a very dark day for Mary - was this what was promised?, some at the time backed the crucifixion as they thought they were doing the right thing - keeping the flame of their religion burning, many may have thought it was just another criminal getting what they deserved. For the few following Jesus at the time, the great hope seemed extinguished - was God with them now?

Had God lost control?, Jesus is crucified. Was what was promised to Mary wrong? No. This was the very moment, the epicentre of god's activity, in God's desire to be with us, he did the most sacrificial and only thing possible, He sent his son into this world to pay for the sins of mankind, to restore our relationship with him, to set us free - God with us.

We are reminded that at Christmas, even if it seems dark, even when it seems purposeless, even when it seems to have no good, even when it seems that this is an unredeemable illness, an unredeemable death, this is an unredeemable job loss, an unredeemable situation in my marriage, there is nothing good that will come from this and there is no way that the so part of some overarching plan, and when things are OK,

things are going well at Christmas we are reminded God with us, because Jesus came into our very real world and restores our relationship with Him.

When the Angel Gabriel finished talking to Mary, telling Mary this is what's going to happen, this is what you have to look forward to, of course she did not know any of the details, of what was to happen, she did not know about the donkey ride, she did not know about Herod, she did not know about the slaughter, she did not know that one day she would see her son taken away from her and crucified, she didn't know that one day he would rise from the dead, she didn't know that two thousand years later people people across the world would gather in her sons name and celebrate him as the Son of God, she didn't know any of that, but she did something at that point when God spoke to her through the Angel that we can all do, if we choose, if we choose God with us, to follow and be with Jesus.

This is how Mary responded:

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

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Just like Mary, God is with us, and like Mary we have a choice about how we respond to God being with us, even without knowing where it will lead, Can you say to God? Will you say to God?

'I am the Lord's servant,'... 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'

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