

Immanuel, God with us

When I used to play rugby, we might be getting ready in the changing room and then the team captain would come in and someone would say "Skip's here", or "Here's the chief." They could have said, "Michael's here" but they used a different name because, for us, at that moment, when Mike came into the room it meant more than just Mike, it meant the captain was here. He had a different role and our relationship with him was different.

Jesus was given the name Immanuel, amongst many other names, because when He comes into the room, we say, "God is here, God is with us". When Jesus is with us something very special is happening, we're in the presence of royalty. More than just any old royalty, we are in the presence of the King of kings, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Which reminds me of the story about the Queen who, a few years ago was enjoying a civic lunch in a Town Hall somewhere up here in the North of England. As the time for her speech approached, the mayor turned to her for a reminder of how he should address her. "The first time you call me "Your Majesty", then it's "Ma'am",," advised the Queen. "But I shouldn't worry. You've been calling "Luv" right throughout lunch."

He must have known he was with the Queen but his natural manner didn't change all that much! But at least he knew who she was.

Which reminds me about another story about President Ronald Reagan visiting a care home for the elderly in California. He was introduced to the oldest resident in the home, a 103 year-old lady. "Do you know who I am?" he bellowed. "No need to shout" she replied, "and no I don't know who you are, but if you ask the nurse over there she'll tell you."

If you were sitting in White's Café (other cafes are available) sipping a Moroccan Mint Tea and minding your own business and Ronald Reagan came in, or the Queen, or the Duchess of Cambridge with the little princes, how would you know? Would it be obvious? Would they pay for their own drinks? Would they have an entourage?

What if the monarch of the universe turned up? The one who holds the heavens in the palms of his hands? The one who dwells in splendour? How would you know? How would we not know?

Do you remember that song by Eric Bazilian,

*What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make His way home?*

I know that some of you don't believe in God or have a different view from me and other Christians. If so, you are especially welcome here today!

What would make you think, "Gosh, look, there is a God and (s)he is here with us"? Or let's think of it in terms of our own royalty...!

- The Atheist might say, I don't believe in the Queen.
- The Agnostic might say, I am not sure if there is a Queen.
- The Deist might say, there is a Queen but she never comes out.
- The Pantheist might say, the Queen is everywhere, hiding.
- The Polytheist might say, there are lots of Queens.

How would we know? ... Gosh, look, there's the Queen, here with us, ordering a flat white.

How do we know God with us?

The Christmas story tells that there is a God, that He is not only the creator of the universe but that He is very personal, very involved and very much loves you.

God chooses not to reveal himself in splendour with an entourage, although that's where He comes from, but he reveals himself as a baby. Not born in a private hospital with the best care available and the eyes of the world on him but born in obscurity and poverty.

Very few recognised Immanuel, God with us.

This is the nativity story I would love you to hear. That God in heaven decided to save you and me by becoming like you and me, one of us, maybe not a slob but certainly on the bus.

That's how close He gets. But there's more. The star stops over Bethlehem but the sun sets over Golgotha where Jesus was sacrificed, where He died to save you from your sins. To clear a way back to the God who is with us, reaching out to us and welcoming us home.

- Forgiving our sins by His death on the cross.
- Power for a new life by His resurrection from the dead.
- And Immanuel, God with us, every day, by the presence in each of us of His Holy Spirit.

It's a stunning plan of God's to be with us – and to enable us to be with Him in a way which doesn't vaporise us! You can walk with Him, day by day, getting to know Him as He becomes your best friend.

One of my favourite Christmas poems, by Richard Crashaw, contrasts the immensity of God the creator with the smallness of the nativity gospel story:

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span;
Summer in winter; day in night;
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav'n to earth.*

Would you like to know God with you? This God who stoops to reach you? You can do. It's costs nothing and it costs everything. There's no charge, no fee, you don't have to do or earn anything to be able to know God with you. But on the other hand you have to give Him your whole life.

I'm going to pray a prayer which you are invited to pray with me. It is a prayer of repentance for the way we turn against and away from this loving God and a prayer inviting His Holy Spirit to be with us, Immanuel, today.

My promise to you is that if you pray this prayer and give your life to the Lord Jesus, the God of heaven who sent Jesus, His Son, as a baby, He will fill you with His Holy Spirit, and that the power that raised Jesus from the grave will rescue you and transform your life.

This God who is with us, is personal, close by, facing you.

He is merciful, a wonderful counsellor, the Prince of peace, Saviour, Redeemer, Repairer of Souls, the Refresher of our spirit, the Healer of our wounds

He's the one who stands beyond doubt, who is the Answer to every question, without whom nothing ultimately makes sense

He is the Hope when we despair, the Excitement in our drudgery, giving Purpose for our life and meaning for our existence.

He is powerful, all-powerful and yet gentle, so gentle

He is glorious in majesty and yet we approach him

He is Holy and righteous yet we stand in His presence

Come Holy Spirit of God and be with us.

Lord, I come to you, increasingly aware that I have made choices and pursued roads that take me away from you. I am sorry, I repent and turn to you. I receive your forgiveness.

I invite you to fill me with your Holy Spirit and be with me every day in every way.

Amen.

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