

## **GOSPEL SEEDS**

**JANUARY, 2005**

*Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation*

### **EMMANUEL - GOD IS WITH US!**

*Now all this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: 'Look! The virgin is with child and will give birth to a son whom they will call Emmanuel', a name which means 'God-is-with-us'. (Mt 1:22-23)*

*Emmanuel: God who became human in Bethlehem.*

These words quoted by Matthew, first spoken around 734 B.C. by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14) have come to be seen as one of the main Messianic texts, fulfilled by Jesus. The words are typically associated, as here, with the nativity of Jesus, and used in countless Christmas services, carols or set alongside images of Mary with the baby Jesus or beside full crib / nativity scenes. It tells us that God took on human flesh - which is an awesome fact! Yet these words about Emmanuel are not just to be brought out at Christmas to provide useful factual information about Jesus' identity and parenthood and lineage. Emmanuel does not just summarise a historic fact limited to the past. Emmanuel - God's presence with us and specifically in and united to human nature - is not something of no or only a little consequence. It changes everything.

In short, God took on human nature, so that man could take on divine nature! Jesus' birth is the first showing forth of our salvation! It is Good News. It is a mystery to be entered into, lived, and offered to others, not just quaintly remembered at Christmas or sung about nostalgically. We are challenged to learn from its homeless setting in a wretched animal manger among the poor. Do we seek for God among the poor and care for them as for him? Do we accept God into the wretched parts of our own lives too?

*Emmanuel - God's presence with us always.*

Yet, there is more to the meaning of Emmanuel than this. God emptied himself to take on human nature - sharing a body like ours. He emptied himself and laid aside divine privilege. He fed on his mother's milk, cried, went to the toilet and needed to be cleaned. And yet this was Emmanuel, God with us! God in Jesus is now at heart of human nature and family life. The way he was united to and chose to be emptied into human nature affected all his life. Jesus' hidden years were lived out in the tiny village of Nazareth and his public ministry to 3 years in a relatively small area of Palestine. He even died - but the death of God-with-us had unique consequences.

Death could not hold Emmanuel! Dying, he destroyed the power of sin and death over our human nature and he rose with a glorified spiritual body as the beginning of a new creation and human family, the second and last Adam, head of the church, his body. Paul puts it like this: "If there is a natural body, there is a spiritual body too. So the first man, Adam, as scripture says, became a living soul; and the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). Paul explains the application of this to the Romans. "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead has made his home in you, then he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you. (Romans 8:11)

Jesus is alive. God has a human body forever. He entered Heaven with a glorified human body. Heaven and earth are now fully united! God is with us forever and we can be with

God forever. Jesus, Emmanuel, is now fully transcendent and yet can also access and be available to all time and space -and to all human hearts.

We can experience this now as well as after death. In John's Gospel, Jesus puts it this way: "Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him, and make a home in him." (John 14:23) He is active and present in the Sacraments and especially and uniquely in Eucharist. Coming with and by Spirit, received in faith and with love, he makes each of us temples of his presence, - parts of his body. Truly God is with us! He is never far away but really close, coming alongside to mercifully help us in all times and needs. How conscious of this are we? Do we really let God be Emmanuel in this way? Always?

*Emmanuel: the content, method and energy of the Good News.*

Having died and risen, he is even more fully Emmanuel. This is the Good News we are called to share in and bring to others. God wants to be with each person. The announcement of "Emmanuel!" in a way summarises the Good News! In a way it is also its method and energy. When Jesus gave the Apostles the great missionary mandate for the church he assured them he is with them! "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations ... And look I am with you always, yes, to the end of time." (from Matthew 28: 19-20) How can God's presence be and do all this? God-with-us is not a passive presence that just occupies space but a dynamic one that acts, stimulates and transforms. It is one to which all else have to react in some way - saying yes or no to the invitation to be present to God who is present to them! Throughout Scripture, God's presence - and especially the glory that marks his presence - has always done this. His presence is always evangelistic if we have eyes to see!

Evangelisation involves human activity but at heart it is God who is present and works. There are lots of different images and approaches to describing evangelisation - and indeed, many are needed. In terms of human response, one - that also covers Christian growth and sanctification - is to recognise God who is already present and acting and to yield to him, that he be truly or fully born in us, his life increasing and taking control as ours diminishes and yields. This is to recognise Emmanuel and to allow him to be born and grow! Seen like this, to be a co-worker in God's evangelistic work, to be a witness to God who is present to and among us, can be well expressed in these words of Cardinal Suhard. "To be a witness consists neither in propaganda nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would make no sense if God did not exist." If we live with Emmanuel at the centre of our lives we can become real witnesses to him, "other Emmanuels", drawing others to him.

*Emmanuel - a Virgin is with Child: the role of Mary.*

How can we respond effectively to Emmanuel? Biblically, Emmanuel is linked to a virgin with child. A virgin woman cannot have a child unless God overshadows her with his presence, and is the child's father. Then the child will be divine, God-with-us. Yet God did not just borrow Mary's womb. She is his handmaid and actively co-operated as a mother. God first dwelt in her heart; Emmanuel was then formed in her womb by her consent. She brought him forth, first showing him to the world. She lived with him, under his divine authority as he was under her human authority. Nothing in Mary's life makes sense unless God exists and everything in it points to God. If we want to come close to Emmanuel, if we want God to be born in us, if we want to witness to his presence, to offer him to others and help him be born in others and named in their experience and hearts, we could do well to learn from Mary and her own journey with and experience of Emmanuel.

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