

Emmanuel

If I were to ask you to think of three words that you associate with Christmas I wonder what you would say. Maybe peace, love and goodwill. Or maybe indulgence, excess and indigestion. Well I want to suggest to you three words that are at the very heart of what Christmas ought to be about and they come from our reading this morning from Matthew's Gospel. In fact they are a translation of one word that is found there and that comes in verse 23, where the angel who appears to Joseph quotes from the prophet Isaiah.

‘Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel.’

And it's the word 'Emmanuel', the name of the child that will be born, that I want to think about for a few minutes: 'Emmanuel' a Hebrew word which is translated by three English words: 'God with us.' Those are our three Christmas words and I want to briefly think of them each of them in turn.

So the first word is 'God' and immediately we are reminded that, believe it or not, Christmas is all about God. Not indulgence, excess and indigestion but God, not matter how hard we may try to delete the God dimension. But what is so extraordinary about Christmas is what it tells us about God, what it reveals to us about God. After all, I suspect we all have our own ideas about God. Even if we don't believe in him – and that assumes he is a 'him' - we have some idea of what we mean by the God we don't believe in. I like the story of the little girl who is drawing one day and her mother comes and asks her what she is drawing. 'God', she says. 'Oh, that's interesting', says her Mum. 'No-one knows what God looks like!' 'Well they will when I've finished', says the little girl. You see, we've all got our ideas of God, but actually those ideas are mostly useless because when it comes to God we really don't have a clue. A great theologian once described the human heart as an idol factory. In other words we continually create gods in our own image, imagining how we think God must be or God ought to be but these are mostly vain idols, figments of human fantasy. The truth is that if we are going to know what God is like God must reveal himself. God must show himself to us and as Christians we believe that this is what happened with Jesus Christ. Here we see God become flesh. Here we see God with a human face, revealing truths about God

that we could never otherwise know. And this is the staggering thing about Christmas. In that tiny, vulnerable baby in the manger in the stable we find God with us, God coming amongst us, the Creator becoming a creature, walking in our shoes, experiencing life from our side. And everything flows from that. The world changes, human life changes when you believe that God has come alongside us and become one of us.

So that's the first word, 'God'. What about 'with' – God *with* us. What a world there is in that one word. In one way it just confirms what we have already said about God, that this God is one who comes to be with us, to walk amongst us in our shoes and our skin. But there is another way that we can think of that word 'with'. If I say to you that I am with you it might mean that I am present to you, beside you, but it might also mean that I am on your side. If you're having an argument and you tell me about it and I say, 'I am with you!', it means that I support you, that I back you up. And this is the good news of Christmas, not just that God is with us, present in our midst, but that God is with us, on our side. Going back to our ideas of God, our fantasies of what God is like, they so often portray God as an ogre, a tyrant, a killjoy, someone who delights in scolding us and forbidding us from enjoying ourselves – and above all, someone who is forever judging us. This is a god with anger issues who casts a shadow over human life. Well, when I think of God 'with' us I think of that marvellous passage in Paul's letter to the Romans where Paul thinks of all the things that diminish and that spoil human life, all the deathly things that seem to be against us and that resist life. And Paul concludes so joyfully, 'If God is for us, who is against us?' Or he might equally have said, 'if God is with us, who can be against us?' And just think of what defiance there is in that statement. Think of all the things that might crush us, all the things that might cause us to lose heart and give up. Think of all the tragedies that befall us – sickness and disease and loss. Think of people humiliated by oppression and exploitation. Think of refugees fleeing tyranny and brutality. Think of political prisoners languishing in jails. Well, think of this – whoever or whatever is against them, God is for them. Whoever or whatever is against them, God is with them. Hallelujah. In this context that word 'with' is a defiant word, and from it there begins the fight back and the courage to resist.

'God with...' - and what about 'us'? What about that third Christmas word? Well, let's think of it this way. God is what unites us and binds us together as the human race. After all we live in a world of such diversity and

variety and difference - different nations, different languages, each individual different and unique, and there is so much that differentiates and separates us as human beings. But what is there that unites us? What holds us together? What makes us 'us'? This is a serious and pressing issue when we abandon God. An entirely secular world which has banished God struggles to find any basis for unity, any grounds for discerning what is common to all as well as what distinguishes us and makes us different. As Christians we believe in one God, Creator of all, and we believe in one Jesus Christ, saviour of all. As Christians we assert that God so loved the world that he sent his Son that we might not perish but that we might have eternal life, and this is a love that binds us all together in one common humanity. As Christians we look into the face of every human being and we see there the image of God that gives us a family resemblance, making us brothers and sisters.

This is the good news. Emmanuel, God with us – three words that sum up Christmas. God – not just any God, not a God that we make up, but the God who we see revealed in the birth and the life and the ministry and the healing and the forgiving and the dying and the rising of this Galilean preacher. 'God with' – God who is on our side and gives us the courage to resist all that is deathly and destructive and that diminishes life. 'God with us' - the God who unites us into one family, where we discern one another as brothers and sisters – and where we find the basis for peace and love and goodwill. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
we praise you today for the good news of Emmanuel,
God with us.
We praise you that you here in this baby in Bethlehem
we see God present in the world;
And we pray today for you be present and at work
wherever human life is threatened,
and wherever hatred and division destroy lives,
and wherever people feel abandoned and forsaken.
Bring peace we pray, the peace that comes from justice
and from forgiveness and reconciliation...

And we praise you that here in this baby in Bethlehem
we see God with us, God standing by us,

our advocate and helper.

We pray today for those who feel that life is against them:
those who struggle with illness, or loss,
those who feel abandoned or betrayed and unloved,
those who suffer from anxiety and depression,
those who wrestle with addiction.

O God, let them know you as with them,
the one from whose love they can never be separated,
the one who strengthens and sustains them.
Bless those who will be working today in caring professions,
Nurses and doctors and hospital staff,
and those who will be bringing cheer to the homeless
and the hungry.

And we praise you that here in this baby in Bethlehem
We see one before who we are invited to bow together,
as one human family.
Unite us we pray and overcome our hatreds and divisions.
We pray today for world leaders and politicians who
strive to bring unity to a disordered and fractured world.
And we pray for you church, that it may be a sign of unity,
a sign of sisterhood and brotherhood
as we bear witness to the one God and parent of us all,
and his son our saviour Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray all these things. Amen.