

A Advent 04 19 Dec 2010 St Michael's Studio City
Matthew 1.23 RCL

Emmanuel, God Is With Us

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1.23)

I wonder what it means, this name, Emmanuel, God Is With Us? What does “God is with us” mean? Depending on how one looks at life and reality, one could point to lots of evidence that God is not with us, that there is no God or that whatever God there might be doesn't care and is not involved with us. That is precisely the position of lots of people who look on Christians and believers in other religions with pity and condescension: There is no God and you are foolish to believe that there is.

If we interpret this phrase, this name of Jesus, name of the Messiah, as meaning that life is interpreted according to our human principles, then the skeptics have a point. Human beings have consistently asked their gods of any sort for much the same things: keep us safe, give us long life, give us health, wealth, and love; make life easy. Few of us have these things and those that do possess them should hold them in fear and trembling. For all things change, nothing is guaranteed. We all know that anyone is just a heartbeat away from a health crisis, a stock market turn away from poverty, a fanatic's bomb away from maiming or death, a drunk driver away from losing all that we hold dear.

The word “Emmanuel” appears three times in the Bible, twice in the Old Testament *Isaiah* and once in the New Testament *Matthew*. The *Isaiah* passages indicate that a young woman is now pregnant and before her child is old enough to choose between right and wrong the nation's present enemies would be destroyed. That prediction came true, but the nation of Judea went on to be conquered and re-conquered in the next six hundred years. Where is the meaning of “God is with us?”

The Matthew passage we heard in today's gospel reading. In this version of the birth of the Messiah, Emmanuel is to be at least one of the names of God's agent, God's blessing on Israel. Yet the people who belong to this Emmanuel are to be persecuted for hundreds of years. His people by birth, the Jews, will have their nation destroyed by the Romans and their people scattered across the face of the earth. His people by faith, the gathering who walked His way of life by trust and belief, will be hunted and executed for hundreds of years. After their church becomes legitimate in the eyes of the authorities, it will be used and twisted to keep people docile and even enslaved. The very Man who bears this title will be tortured and crucified. Where is the meaning of “God is with us?”

Not throughout history and not now do we appear to have consistently the things we constantly ask God for: health, wealth, long life, love, safety. They are all ephemeral, they pass away as does the mist of the morning.

So, if we are to believe our scriptures, our Bible, our God, God's Messiah, what does "God is with us" mean?

I think the only reasonable interpretation is from God's point of view, as much as we can see in that fashion. We need to ask: what does God mean when She says that He is with us, that He will never abandon us, that She is as close as our breath, that our spirits are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit? That perspective is much harder to see, and I must admit to deep suspicion of anyone who says to me that he or she knows what God thinks. But in this case I think we need to make a humble effort, emphasis on the word "humble."

If suffering, a crippled life, exile, even death, do not negate the Messiah's name or mission, what does "God is with us" mean?

Our answer is based on an assumption that God is good and loving. There is as much evidence for this as for the contrary, but we don't have time to explore that now. We must ask for the assumption that God is not a monster and that, as John's First Letter says, "God is love." ^(1 John 4.8, 16) What does a lover do in respect of the beloved? True love is always focused on the welfare of the beloved, even to the detriment of the lover. The welfare of the beloved is not always what the beloved thinks it is. The beloved can be immature, wrong, deranged, or even evil.

It is a loving thing to imprison the criminally insane, to keep them from harming themselves or others. It is a loving thing to force medications upon tubercular people or the mentally ill. It is a loving thing to require immunizations in spite of the momentary pain of the needle. It is a loving thing to require our children learn adult skills and values; otherwise, their lives will be stunted and unfulfilled. There are other things we could mention, but the principle is this: we need to look beyond the present to see what real meaning is.

For God, this perspective is eternal. It includes the here and now, the rest of our lives, and eternal life. God wants the best for us now and for eternity. We may think a diet of the candy of ease is what we need; God knows that a good dose of challenge is far healthier, that adversity forges character. Scripture reassures us on this point; Saint Paul writes to the Romans: "... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts..." ^(Romans 5.3-5)

God does not will suffering, but God can use suffering for our ultimate benefit. Even the ultimate evil of the death of Jesus is turned around by God to become the means of eternal life for all humankind. Our death is taken into His death and then transformed into resurrection. We would never have asked for this on our own. But God knows what is the best for us and works for our ultimate benefit.

So this is where “Emmanuel” leads us. Emmanuel *is* true, God *is* with us. In that assurance we can live an abundant life, as Jesus said He had come to bring. (John 10.10) We can live in confidence of our ultimate fulfillment, begun in this life, crowned in eternity. For God has taken the initiative, over and over again, to be with us. Emmanuel is always the name of God when He is dealing with Her creation. Rejoice, for this is good news to people of good will.