

Readings:

Isaiah 52: 7-10
Hebrews 1: 1-4
John 1: 1-14

Immanuel – God with us

Well done! You made it – everything's done and you're ready. Christmas? Bring it on. Well, if you're not ready, tough – because by the time you get home it will be Christmas Day.

At some point maybe you'll have some visitors – people who've come to see you and be with you. But will you be with them? Or will you be so busy in the kitchen that you hardly get to spend any time with them? Sometimes we might be guilty of using the excuse of being busy in the kitchen to avoid having to spend time with an awkward relative. Yes, we give them hospitality and sort of make them welcome, but we aren't really with them in any real sense of the word. We don't give them our undivided attention or spend some quality time with them.

There are many different ways of being with people or having them be with us – it works both ways. Some of us have family and friends who are far away and so we won't be with them physically over Christmas but we will be with them in our thoughts. Sometimes we might say 'Oh yes – I'm with you' when we understand what someone is explaining to us. You may remember the advertising slogan from some years ago – 'We're with the Woolwich'. Being with the Woolwich had nothing to do with physical presence of course – it was about what you did with your money, or rather, what you let them do with it.

I need hardly remind you that Christmas is the time of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ – celebrating that our God has chosen to come and be with us, and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to live among us as one of us. Jesus didn't just live among the people in a detached kind of way like a visitor from another planet with little or no understanding of what it means to be a human being. He lived with the people, from his birth to his death, sharing in every aspect of their lives. He became completely human, just like us, in order to redeem us – to bring us into a right relationship with God. Jesus came into the world as part of it, as a real fleshly human being. Someone who we are told enjoyed a good party and got called a wine-bibber. Someone who suffered the bitter agony of betrayal and died a lonely and painful death on the cross.

John tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us. The word translated lived in the gospel reading means literally that Jesus tabernacled with us. It's a reference to the time the Israelites spent in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land. The tabernacle was the tent of meeting where Moses met with God. Jesus is the one in whom we meet with God. If we want to know what it means for God to be with us we look at Jesus.

In our gospel reading we are also told that Jesus came as the light – the light of life – the light that shines in the darkness, the light of love and truth. This light that Jesus brings doesn't shine on the darkness of the world as if from afar, or a police helicopter searchlight circling overhead, but shines from within the darkness and illuminates all it touches.

December 24th 2017 – 1st Communion of Christmas

Jesus promises to us and to all who receive him – that is those who accept and welcome him into their lives, not just giving intellectual assent – all who receive him will become children of God.

Becoming children of God as Paul tells us makes us co-heirs with Christ of all the good things of the life promised by God – not only in the life to come, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, also in the here and now. Being children of God puts us in a closer relationship with God – a relationship that is open to everyone who says yes to God's gracious invitation to be with him.

Jesus came to be with his people – the Jewish nation chosen by God centuries before to live in a special relationship with him. Just like our own vision statement – that in knowing him they would make him known. But the history of God's people as recorded in the Old Testament is the story of the failure of the people to live as God had intended. The Old Testament tells us the history of God with his people but more often than not, while he was faithfully with them, they were not with him. And as John tells us, the coming of God in the flesh was no different – he was unrecognised and rejected.

But still the promise of relationship with God goes on – God longs to be with his people. He longs for them to be with him. It is no different even today. The message of the Bible is that God invites us to be with him, as he is with us.

Jesus invites us to abide in him, and he will abide in us. Being with someone doesn't get any closer than that. Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from God and his love. He is truly with us whatever happens, whatever we do, wherever we go.

God loves us and is with us always. He promises to hear our prayers when we call on him. Psychologists tell us that the experience of being listened to, really listened to as God listens to us is as effective in terms of our feelings of self-worth as being loved. God listens to us and he loves us.

It used to be said that what people feared most was death. But now it seems that what people fear is isolation and loneliness. Not just the people who sleep in our streets – anyone can be lonely and feel cut off from the rest of humanity. Perhaps for those in that situation to say that God is always with us is a bit of a dull platitude. Nevertheless it is true, and it is for us as the people of God, the body of Christ in this place to make it true in any way that we can for those who need to know that God is with them and that he loves them.

The name of our church is a constant reminder to us – Immanuel – God is with us. That is the message of good news and hope which we offer to the world. That is what we are celebrating tonight – Immanuel – God with us – inseparably, forever.

Thanks be to him. Amen.

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24th December 2017