

## 2 - IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

*'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')"' (Matthew 1:20-23).*



Anton Raphael Mengs The Dream of St. Joseph, c1774

### Background info

The word 'Immanuel,' was first referred to in Isaiah 7:14, given to a child who would signify both God's salvation and judgement for the sins of Judah, and echoed later in the angel's words to Joseph in the first chapter of Matthew; 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:20-21).

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### a) God is with His people

(Read Ezekiel 37:26-28, Haggai 2:1-9, 2 Corinthians 6:16-18)

Ezekiel 37 brings us the prophet's vision of dry bones in a valley, signifying hopelessness, and death. But as Ezekiel speaks God's word these bones become living bodies, a vast army.

The picture is of Israel, seemingly cut off, being brought back to life by God's Spirit, returned to its own land and reunited with Judah, never again to be divided. God brings hope to a situation that seems hopeless, life from death. They will finally be the people God chose them to be, and he will be for ever their God.

Not long after Ezekiel's prophesy, and around 520 BC, Haggai is bringing God's

words to the people as they build a temple somewhat less glorious than the previous one. Fortunately, God is not too concerned, reminding them of His covenant with Israel and His Spirit with them.

They are to be strong, 'for I am with you, declares the Lord.' And they are not to fear, because 'the glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house.'

It would certainly be different, as the second temple would be honoured by the presence of Jesus Christ.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians also mentions the temple and follows a plea to rid themselves of connections with their pagan past, which sits poorly with their Christian witness. 'For we are the temple

of the living God' says Paul. The God who lives and walks with them. The God who says, 'they will be my people'.

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## Discussion...

Q) Although worldwide, Christianity is flourishing as a faith, this is not reflected in the global north. Could Ezekiel's picture of the bones seem all too real in some countries, and how might it be addressed?

Q) Few of us worship in temples (or even cathedrals), so how would you understand Paul's description of believers being 'the temple of the living God'?

Q) The prophets were clear, that just as in the past God walked with his people and led them through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and one of fire at night (Exodus 13:21-22), the situation has not changed. God still walks with and leads his people. How easy is that to appreciate?

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## b) Jesus is with all believers

(Read Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 18:9-11, Galatians 2:19-20)

The very brief passage from Matthew, known as the Great Commission, is one of the most important ones for establishing a basic framework for a church that would soon be established.

We read that some of those present still doubted, although this is less likely to be any of Jesus' closest disciples, as they had already seen him post-resurrection. Jesus lays out what is to be their calling, to go beyond where he has brought them and take his word and power to the whole world, something they would never be able to do without his continued presence in their lives.

Paul certainly appreciated that closeness to Jesus in his own ministry, finding a lot of opposition to his teaching, and at times struggling with frustration and

self-confidence as he faithfully followed his calling to mission. One day there was a positive response, the next he was preaching to closed minds.

In his conversion experience on the Damascus Road, Paul had responded to the voice of Jesus calling to him, and now he recognises that same voice telling him not to be afraid, but to carry on with confidence; 'For I am with you'.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul goes a step further and declares, 'Christ lives in me'. He lives by faith, and therefore is a very different Paul to the one he once was.

## Discussion...

Q) How easy do you find it to understand the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit, in that divine unity we call the Trinity?

Q) Why is the season of Advent important to our understanding of the Jesus who emerges at the Jordan River as an adult?

Q) How do we recognise the voice of God?

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## c) The Spirit is with all believers

(Read John 14:15-20, Romans 8:9-11, 1 John 4:13-16)

Jesus always intended his disciples to continue the work he had started, and perhaps achieve even greater things than he had accomplished. It would be impossible for the disciples to believe this was possible in their own strength, knowing the character and power of Jesus. And yet, there were more converts after the initial Pentecost sermon by Peter than all the recorded teaching of Jesus in the New Testament.

Jesus was clear that if the disciples maintained their connection through prayer and obedience then all things were possible. It would be the Holy Spirit informing and strengthening their faith, decisions, and mission.

And that's where the sections of this study come together, from the Old and New Testaments to our own lives as disciples, with a realisation of the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit in purpose. 'On that day you will realise,' says Jesus, 'that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you' (John 14:20).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul provides a stark contrast between those who linger in the 'realm of the flesh' and those in the 'realm of the Spirit' (the old life and the new). He is confident that believers have the Spirit of life, the Spirit of the God who



Conversion on the Way to Damascus, Caravaggio, c.1600-1

raised Jesus from the dead, living within their hearts and souls.

The author of 1 John is in full accord with Paul's thoughts, that if we believe that God loves us, and through faith accept all that Jesus has done for us, living lives rooted in that love, then through the Spirit, God is in us.

## Discussion...

Q) What image of God is revealed when Jesus tells his disciples, 'I will not leave you as orphans'?

Q) Paul contrasts the 'before' and 'after' in the spiritual lives of believers. How difficult can that transition be?

Q) We have seen the Bible talk of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit becoming a part of who believers are, living in and guiding them. What can that reveal to us about Immanuel – God with us?

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## Let's pray...

For those who approach Advent purely as a time of spending and partying, and for the many who fall into debt because of the pressure to buy what they cannot really afford.

### Quotes

*'God simply told us to think of Jesus as Immanuel, which means 'God with us.' How amazing that one of the main ways God wants us to think about the person of Jesus is as 'a sharing, an embrace of life by life, a total identification of God with the object of his love.'*

— Holly Sprink, *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness*

*'If we could condense all the truths of Christmas into only three words, these would be the words: 'God with us.'*

— John F. MacArthur