

This is the last week in our series called Carols. Over the weeks we have taken a phrase from a well-known carol and thought about what it might mean for us today. Last week the carol we looked at was Away in a Manger, and the phrase was, the little Lord Jesus. From it we saw that most of us are partially committed whereas we should be fully committed followers of Christ.

Today, we're looking at the carol 'O come, O come Emmanuel'. The earliest paraphrases of this text is in a poem written by the English poet Cynewulf which was written before the year eight hundred. However, the earliest surviving evidence of the current text is in the seventh edition of Psalterium Canticum Catholicorum, which was published in Cologne in 1710. Cynewulf took words that had been written by an unknown author in what we now call 'the dark ages'. That author was probably a monk because the author must have had an understanding of Scripture as the song displays a wealth of phrases from the old Testament that speak of the coming Messiah. Then, in the early nineteenth century, an Anglican priest named John Mason Neale, who was quite frail but absolutely brilliant – he could write and speak 22 languages but, because of jealousy and political chicanery, he was shunted off to work in Madeira. He established an orphanage, a school for girls and a ministry to evangelise and reclaim prostitutes. In his spare time was reading through an ancient book of hymns, the "Psalterium Canticum Catholicorum" and found this hymn in Latin. The tune was from a fifteenth century French Franciscan convent of nuns ministering in Portugal. Rev Neale translated the Latin into English and this carol as we know it was born.

A gift was penned by unnamed monks over 1200 years ago. Given a tune by nuns in an obscure convent. Rediscovered by a forgotten evangelist off the coast of Africa. Hidden for centuries but now enjoyed by millions worldwide. No one does it alone. Each of us has a part to play in God's big story. God is the One who orchestrates history. And the theme of His song is "Emmanuel."

Matthew 1:21-22 <sup>21</sup> *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>[f]</sup> because he will save his people from their sins.* <sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:*

Let us pause there, just for a moment. Matthew is going to quote from words that were written by Isaiah the prophet around 740 years before the event that was about to take place. 740 years is a very long time to wait but it shows that God has a plan, and God has a time, and his timing is perfect.

<sup>23</sup> *'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').*

If this was a movie this is the point where the music would get very dramatic and the voice-over would boom, 'Immanuel, God with us'. Course it would be better and more dramatic than I've just done it. Yet, for the Jews hearing this story it is the most earthshattering news possible. They could look back into the history to where God had been with them in a pillar of fire and of cloud, of his presence in the Tabernacle, and in the temple. They would have known that God was too holy to even look on him. They would have known that Moses had

to hate his face when God passed by because Moses could not handle the full presence of God. They would have known that when God lived in the temple it was only the high priest who was allowed into his presence. They had to tie a rope around the priest's leg so that if he died in the presence of God they could pull him out from behind the curtain.

And suddenly Matthew says, 'He is with us'. What is it that made the shepherds run back into the fields rejoicing? What was it that caused the Wise Men to fall on their face and bow down and worship? It was this fact and this fact alone, that God is not a distant, far off, uninvolved God. That God is not someone who just watches over us, but that God was now with us. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe is a relational God who stripped Himself of His glory and became like us in the form of a baby, who was all God and yet all man without sin, He lived on earth. John 1:1 says:

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.  
Verse 14: The Word became flesh and made his home among us.*

The message puts it like this: *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.*

And all of the sudden Matthew is going to say this:

**God is with you, God was with you, God will be with you.**

And that's the best news ever. The problem is that many of you simply don't believe it, you don't! I mean, I can kind of tell because you're just sitting there – there's no reaction. This is the most important news ever. It will be repeated in churches all over the world over these next weeks and in many cases it will be so familiar that there will be no response.

Many Christians who hear, 'God is with you', go, 'Really?' Because I don't feel him right now! There's no tingling! No goosebumps, I don't feel him.

Christmas is a time that seems to magnify the good, making things seem much better. However, it also magnifies the difficult, making things seem much worse. For some of you, this will be a time of relational tension, health issues or loneliness. You're facing this difficult thing and all the time you're asking, Where is God in this?

Some of you, if you were really honest you'd say, I've done something in my life that I'm so ashamed of, why would God want to be with someone like me? God with me? It's really hard to believe!

So, the goal for today, with God's help, is that you leave convinced that God is, that God was, and that God will always be with you. He is Immanuel, God with us.

So the 1<sup>st</sup> thing is, **God is with you!**

In Luke 1:28 a very polite angel appears to Mary:

*The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'*

Mary must have been in shock so what's the 1<sup>st</sup> thing she would need to know? The Lord is with you. If you are here today and life is a struggle you need to know that God is with you. God is the God of all comfort. The word comfort is translated from the word parakletos: it really means called to come alongside. The holy spirit is the heavenly Paraclete. He comes alongside to minister to us in times of trouble. Many people just don't believe that because if we did believe it, not just as a nice idea but as a reality, it would change the way we did everything. It would change our attitude to life.

What power does the illness have when you know that God is with you? Why would you worry about your finances when you know that God is with you? What about that situation at work when God is with you? What about that difficult relationship when God is with you? What about sharing the grace of God when you know that he is with you?

When you understand that the God of the universe, the All-knowing, All-powerful, Ever-present God, that God is with you and that changes everything. Let me define it, when you are lost and don't know where to go, He is with you as your guide. When you're hurting and feel alone, He is with you as your friend. When you're in the middle of a trial, our God is with you as your comforter. If you're ever sick, our God is with you as your healer. Whenever you're weak, our God is with you as your strength. Anytime you're lost in your sin, our God is with you as your Saviour.

*Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.'*

So, point 1, God is with you. Point 2: **God was with us.**

Sometimes, when you're in the middle of the storm, it can be difficult to discern where God is. Often it's only when we look back that we begin to understand how God has been with us. There's a story in the old Testament about Joseph. Joseph was his father's favourite child and he believed that he was going to be a great leader. Unfortunately, being quite young, Joseph didn't deal with his brothers very well. He was a bit arrogant and he played on the fact that he was his father's favourite. Eventually his brothers found an opportunity to sell him as a slave and pretend to their father that he had been killed by a wild animal.

Somehow through these circumstances Joseph learnt how to live with integrity. He was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Looking at his situation from a distance, it would be really easy to ask where God was in it all. It's only later, looking over the course of his life, that Joseph realised that God had been working behind the scenes all along. Joseph had always been a dreamer, in fact, that was partly the cause of conflict with his brothers. However, eventually it was his ability to hear from God and interpret dreams that God used to put him in a position of authority. Eventually he was able to say to his brothers Genesis

50:20 *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

Joseph did, in fact, save his whole family from starvation because of famine.

Genesis 39:20-21 *But while Joseph was there in the prison, 21 the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder.* The Lord was with Joseph.

I want you to take a moment and reflect on your own life. Think about the times God was with you. Some of you will know that God was working in your life before you even knew him. He brought about circumstances that brought Christians into your path, and you were introduced to Jesus. Some of you will be able to think of times of security and comfort in the midst of illness. I look back and see how things I learned years ago have suddenly become useful in a new way. Let's pause for a moment to reflect.

I am only here today because God worked circumstances into my life that meant giving up my job to go back to study; being selected for ministry training; and, experiencing a clear call to this congregation. God was with me as I am sure he was with you in the past.

So, God is with you, God was with you and **God will be with you.**

Think for a moment about Mary as she sees the angel. When the angel said, 'the Lord is with you', imagine how she felt. Imagine if she could have seen the future - I know she couldn't but let's imagine. Would she have said, God will be with me when I tell Joseph, and God will be with Joseph to help him understand. God will be with us when we travel to Bethlehem. God will be with us even when we can't find somewhere to stay. God will be with me when I give birth to his son and lay him to sleep in a manger. God will be with me when we are on the run, heading to Egypt, trying to save our child. God will be with me when I panic because we've lost him and God will be with me when we find him teaching and answering questions in the temple. God will be with me at the wedding feast when they run out of wine and I know I can ask Jesus for a miracle.

God will be with me as I watch my child ridiculed and beaten. God will be with me when I watch him suffer on a cross. God will be with me when I hear Jesus cry, 'It is finished!' God will be with me when I see him take his final breath. God will be with me when the sky turns dark and the earth shakes. God will be with me on that 1<sup>st</sup> night when I wait and wonder. God will be with me on the 2<sup>nd</sup> night when I wait and wonder. God will be with me on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day when I see the stone rolled away and the tomb empty.

We cannot see the future, but what a difference it would make to us if we could really understand the truth that, whatever it holds, God will be with us.

Paul writes in Romans 8:35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*

*Shall trouble? No! Shall hardship? No! Persecution? No! Famine? No! Nakedness? No! What is nakedness doing in this text? I have no idea! Just in case you're wondering,*

*nakedness will not separate you from God! How about danger? No! Sword? No! No, in all of these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.*

Understand this, nothing, no thing, and no one, will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. He will never leave you and He will never forsake you. You never will be alone! Nothing can separate you, not your fears; not your doubts; not your insecurities; not your theological questions; not the things that you can't explain; not your brokenness; not your failures; not your mistakes; not sickness; not a divorce; not what someone else did to you; not broken dreams. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, because He is, He was, He will be with you!

Rev 1:8 *'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'*

God who was in the beginning and will be at the end of all things has promised to be with us always. We have no need to fear. Why? Because our God is with us. He is with us and there is no question whatsoever. It is settled and it is written. He is Emmanuel, God with us. There is no doubt, He is with you. The only question that needs to be answered is this, are you with God? That's the only question that needs to be answered and it's time to give it an honest answer, because God is with you. He is Emmanuel and more than anything else, He wants to reveal His love, His character, His nature, His goodness to you. And more than anything else, He wants you to be with Him; loving Him with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength. Because He's not a God who is far off or uninvolved or distant. He is a relational God who came to earth to reveal himself, to forgive us of our sin, so that it is possible to know Him, serve Him, and have eternal life.