

Today we're getting very close to Christmas. So I want to talk about my absolute favourite word. It's not even really an English word. That word is "Emmanuel!" I love it because it means "God is with us!" - and that is really the significance and the meaning of Christmas!

## Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement<sup>[a]</sup> quietly.

# <sup>20</sup> As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus,<sup>[b]</sup> for he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

# <sup>23</sup> "Look! The virgin will conceive a child!  
She will give birth to a son,  
and they will call him Immanuel,<sup>[c]</sup>  
which means 'God is with us.'"

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

### **PEOPLE DIDN'T KNOW GOD!**

# Before Jesus came to earth, God was not known in the same way He is now. He was best known by the people of Israel, but even by them He was not well known. Very few had the sense that God was with them through every day, and through every season of life. They knew that God was great. They knew He was the Creator. They knew Him as a King. They knew that when they as a country and a people followed him that their national life went better. There had been people who had a close relationship with God – like Abraham, and Moses, and David, and the prophets. But for four hundred years there had been no prophet who spoke out to the nation. For most people religion was basically a lot of rules to be followed.

### **JESUS CAME TO SHOW US GOD**

# It was all about to change, with the birth of a beautiful baby boy in a stable. God would no longer seem to be afar off. Emmanuel had come. "God with us."

## He was showing us a new thing. God's voice in the Old Testament had been likened to thunder. Here He was speaking in a baby's cry. He lived in the splendour of heaven, and He moved into a stable. He lived in a place that was free from sin, pain, suffering and crying – and he was born into a world where the pain of his mother in giving Him birth was just the beginning. From the realms of eternity, He moved into the place where He knew that one day He would be killed.

## He showed us that God is with us through pain, through suffering, through grief, and through death. He showed us that God understands our feelings at these times. He's been there.

## He showed us that God's love for the people of this earth is infinite. Because He was willing to walk all the way from the stable to the cross – because he chose to – because He loves us.

Sometimes I used to think and people used to say that I'd made a bit of a sacrifice to be a missionary in a remote jungle place all those years ago. *But I left a place where sin was rampant, where death was part of life, where pain and suffering happened. All I gave up was hot showers, and indoor plumbing. Jesus gave up the purity, perfection and power that was heaven, to come to this world. He gave up all that He had to give us all that He is.*

To show us what it means when we say "God is with us."

## Jesus showed us that *God's strength is made perfect in weakness*. A baby in a manger would change the world. A man dying a disgraceful death on a cross would reveal to us the love of God. That same man would defeat the power of sin and death by rising again.

Jesus lived His life with no settled home. He lived among the common people – yet He showed us the majesty of God and His power by overruling the powers of nature with His "Peace be still," to the stormy sea. Jesus changed the world without leading a revolution or even a protest movement. Jesus healed people who were sick, he told people stories, and He taught them what God thought about things. He revealed to us that as well as being the only perfectly just judge, God is our loving Father.

### **JESUS IS STILL WITH US**

# But Jesus only stayed on the earth for thirty-three years, then he went back to heaven. So how does that tie in with His name 'God with us.' He's left us, hasn't He? No, he hasn't. Before Jesus left, He talked to His disciples.

# "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go then to all peoples everywhere, and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. ***I will be with you always, to the end of the age.***"

God is still with us. When are we most aware of His presence? When we are doing the things that He told us to – going, making disciples, baptizing, teaching. David Livingstone, the great African explorer and missionary, said, "I was enabled to go on because I had the word of a perfect Gentleman, never known to break a promise, that He would be with me always."

There are times when we all feel that God is not with us. Sometimes during the hard times, we feel that God is not there. If He was there, He'd be doing something, wouldn't he? Sometimes just the sheer monotony of the daily grind makes us forget that God is with us – walking through it with us, carrying our burdens if we let Him, leading us, guiding us, enabling us, as we give Him the opportunity. He's very often in there guiding even when we have no idea of it. Giving us His peace even when times are rough and we don't understand the world we live in.

There are times when we pray and nothing apparently happens. We pray faithfully, we pray with faith. But we don't see the answers we are expecting. We cry out desperately to God – but He seems to be silent. But even then, He is not absent. He *promised* to be with us always. It could be that instead of shaping our circumstances to the way that we want them, instead He is shaping us to be the way He wants us to be – more like Jesus.

I talked to a guy named Bob. He went to church all his life, but he had no idea that God wanted to be with him in his everyday life. So he got married, found a job, and lived his life for thirty years before he found out that God, through Jesus, wanted to have a personal relationship with him. When He committed His life to Jesus, and consciously began living his life according to the directions of God, he was amazed and excited at how different life became. And yet he said, as he looked back, he could see that God had been with him all the time. God had gently led him along the path that led to Himself. And when he really met God, it was like meeting someone who had been there for him all the time.

God is with us. God is with me. God is with you.

The early Christians faced massive persecution, imprisonment, beatings, ridicule, when they turned to Jesus Christ. They suffered. Yet they knew that God was with them.

Still today, all over the world, people are living through persecution and suffering – and they count it all worthwhile to have the presence of Jesus Christ in their lives.

# Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Rom 8.18

Many of Paul’s letters in the New Testament were written from prison.

# He said, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

# No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ.”

Rom 8.35-39

# God is with us. He loves us. How do we know? Because he sent Jesus to die on the cross, to bear the punishment for our sins, so that we could be reconciled to God, or, in other words, so that we could be His friends. What does it mean to be a friend of God? Firstly, it means that there is nothing between you and God – your sin has been cancelled out. You can go near to our pure and holy God. Secondly, just like in a human friendship, it means that there is someone who accepts and loves you as you are. Thirdly, it means that you have the presence of God in your life every minute of every hour of every day!

### **Story: Abiding in the presence p379 SIQ**

Are you lonely? You can live your life in the consciousness of the presence of God with you just like that. Does it work? I know it does, because I’ve tried it. # When I first went to live in PNG I lived in a house with another woman. We became good friends and companions. After she left, and I had to start living by myself with no other Australians closer than a plane flight, or a day’s journey by river, I felt lonely. I was used to sharing the little things of life with someone else, to having someone else around to talk over my problems, and now I couldn’t do it.

So I began to do just what Jacqueline did. I talked to God all day. Sometimes aloud, mostly quietly. When I had problems, I talked to God – sometimes I cried to God. I read my Bible to hear what God might have to say to me. I responded by praying to him with the honest response of my heart. When I walked the bush tracks by myself I talked to Him, sang to Him, complained to Him, and was strengthened by Him. When I sat at home alone (without even a television for company) I kept the conversation going. And gradually, I learned better to listen to Him instead of giving him a barrage of my own thoughts, feelings and emotions. God literally became my best friend. I knew that He was with me. When I got into situations where I didn’t know what to do, I asked God for wisdom.

# And Jesus, Emmanuel is not with us only for our own comfort. He is with us to empower us to do things we don’t think we are able to do. Do you want to be powerful for God? Remember that He is with you. Talk to Him – as you get out of bed in the morning, as you eat your breakfast, as you drive to work, as you do your daily work, whatever it may be. But also spend some dedicated time in His presence – pray, read your Bible, go to prayer meetings, find a prayer partner. Spend some time in silence – not telling God what you need, but waiting for Him to tell you what you need. Give thanks every day for His gifts, and most of all, for His presence. Focus on who God is, and His awesome attributes, not on who you are and your weakness. God uses the weak things of the world to do His ministry, especially when they have trained themselves to hear His voice.

And when you seek closeness with God, don't be surprised if your life takes unexpected turns. God is not with us to give us a more comfortable life. He is with us to make us more like Jesus – to work through us in the important task of making Him known in the world. He is not a tame God, and He will not make us into tame people! When we pray, "Your kingdom come," it might be like stepping onto a roller coaster – suddenly life is unpredictable and adventurous.

When you pray for your children, don't be dismayed if God sends them to do things and go places that you might not have chosen if you'd been in charge of their lives. But you will be praying them into the very best life they could possibly have – chosen for them by the great Creator and the loving Redeemer – Emmanuel. Young people, don't be afraid to follow God's path – it will be rich, challenging and full of purpose.

Look around you for opportunities to minister – within this church, and outside – God is with you. He will lead you, empower you, and give you all the grace you need.

We can all live our lives remembering always that "The Lord is near."  
We can remember that *nothing* can separate us from the love of Christ.  
We can remember his promise, "I will be with you always."

# "God with us" – in our suffering  
in poverty  
in sorrow  
in our joyous times  
in whatever political environment we are in – slavery, political oppression  
in ministry and  
in our families.

It's Christmas.  
Jesus came to this earth.  
They called him, "Emmanuel" which means, "God is with us!"