

We are now in the last Sunday of Advent and Christmas is just a week away from us. As we ponder on the birth of Christ we try to understand the significance it holds for us. Our theme for this morning's meditation is "Mary's son Jesus is 'Emmanuel', 'God with us'." The prophet Isaiah said, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and they shall call his name Emmanuel. Emmanuel is not a personal name but rather the task that he would perform. In the original context it is the announcement of a birth which would be a sign for the house of David, particularly for Ahaz. He is being encouraged to remain firm in his policy of loyalty to Assyria and resistance of Aram and Israel. The sign given to him was that a virgin would give birth to a son who would be the potential heir to all the promises of David. It is related to the fulfilment of God's promises to David and his dynasty. We are not told who this woman is, though the sign is that the baby would be a son and would be named Emmanuel. God would deliver them from Aram and Israel. What would have been seen as impossible by human standards was well within the power of God who delighted to exalt the meek and humble the proud.

When we look at the gospel reading from Matthew we are told that Mary had been engaged to Joseph, and before they came together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, a just man was unwilling to put Mary to shame and therefore decided to divorce her quietly. However, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and reassured him that the child conceived was from the Holy Spirit and that he should take Mary home as his wife.

Matthew also records for us that the angel of the Lord told him that the child Mary had conceived was the work of the Holy Spirit and they were to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua or Joshua in English, meaning 'Yahweh is salvation'. The primary purpose of the coming of Jesus is to offer the forgiveness of sins to all those who believe in his name. All human beings have fallen short of God's standard and stand before him guilty as sinners. We have been alienated from God because of our sin. But God himself provides the way of reconciliation by sending his son Jesus into our world to die for us and to rise again on the third day so that the offer of forgiveness is available to all humanity.

Even as Jesus has made available the forgiveness of sins to all humanity we are to appropriate it individually. God has made the way for reconciliation with him possible through his son Jesus. On the cross Jesus has paid the penalty of all human sin. However, only when we receive him as our Lord and Saviour in our hearts by faith can we appropriate his forgiveness. God has sent us a saviour because our greatest need was the forgiveness of sins.

A second title that is given to Jesus is the name 'Emmanuel' meaning 'God with us.' Jesus brings the presence of God to human beings, he brings the promised salvation which, as Matthew has already explained is also the meaning of the name Jesus. Matthew probably intends the words of Jesus at the end of the gospel saying, "Behold I am with you always, until the end of the age," to correspond to the meaning of Emmanuel. Jesus is God among his people to accomplish their salvation.

The name 'Emmanuel' gives us a tremendous sense of encouragement as we go through difficult situations both in society and in our personal lives. We are assured of the presence of God who understands all our pain and sorrow and gives us the strength to face such situations. We are not alone and God walks with us and carries us through such difficult times.

May we this morning draw strength from the assurance that Jesus is our 'Saviour' and therefore we have the forgiveness of sins and Jesus is 'Emmanuel' meaning God with us.