

Immanuel: God With Us

"At Christmas play, and make good cheer, for Christmas comes but once a year," exhorted 16th century Thomas Tusser. But who is in the mood for carefree Christmas festivities in this year? How many Americans bustle to shopping centres and holidays this December? The devastating terrorist attacks on the Pentagon in Washington and on the Twin Towers of the New York's World Trade Center, resulting in thousands of deaths on September 11, 2001 have been engraved in our memories. It is said that these tragic events were a turning point in world history. Politicians speak of a new war on terrorism. Business leaders talk about an economic melt down. To say we are living in distressing times is an understatement! Scanning through secular magazines and newspapers, I sense that many have surrendered to a philosophy of despair, believing this life is the only thing there is to trust. Terrorists have struck fear into millions all over the world. Fear is a force that paralyzes and destroys. Fear can come in many guises: the fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear of new rounds of terrorist attacks, and the fear of another World War. But the most obvious fear is the fear of death. Who knows what happens after death? Darkness, annihilation, some vague twilight existence? To some, death has always been the terrifying unknown, giving rise to what Hamlet called "that dread of something after death, the undiscovered country." In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare makes Claudio say: "Death is a fearful thing. Ay, but to die, and go we know not where." To Claudio the worst and bitterest of life was to be preferred to death.

But we must not let fear control us. The Church must keep proclaiming the Gospel of hope and light, the message of an angel to terrified shepherds watching over their flock by night in fields near Bethlehem, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10f.). Who is He Who came to earth? God's Son! The apostle Paul said of Him, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9). God sent His only Son to a despairing world! God Himself became one of us. Although the world is in turmoil, we still have reason to celebrate this Christmas! God's Son, though He was infinitely rich, became poor, assumed our human nature, entered our fallen world filled with corruption and violence without ever being tainted by sin Himself. Charles Colson remarked, "When God wanted to defeat sin, His ultimate weapon was the sacrifice of His own Son. On Christmas Day two thousand years ago, the birth of a tiny baby in an obscure village in the Middle East was God's supreme triumph of good over evil."

It is only with a deep sense of awe that one can write about our Lord's entrance into our world as a human baby. With this in mind, we should give heed to this saying: "I will seek to believe rather than to reason; to adore rather than to explain." Our Lord's coming was not unexpected. Jesus came to fulfill what was foretold by the prophet Isaiah: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"- which means "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; cf. Matth. 1:23). God did not remain aloof, remote in heavenly glory, inaccessible. He came to be here among us! In Immanuel, God came to live in this world. He had a human voice, human hands, and a

divine message. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Isa. 7:14; cf. Matth. 1:23 Isa. 7:14; cf. Matth. 1:23). Immanuel – God with us. No one will ever be able to fathom the riches of this truth and the comfort it offers. Immanuel took upon Himself our guilt, bore our griefs and sorrows, was wounded for our transgressions, crucified, buried in a tomb, raised from the dead, and ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us, sent His Spirit into our hearts, and governs the entire universe. Through Him we have hope for today, peace of heart, and the assurance of the life to come in His presence. As Calvin said so well, "Thus Bethlehem, where the child was born, will be to us a door by which we may enter into the presence of the eternal God."

Our Lord did not arrive on this earth in pomp and splendour. He did not go to the high and the mighty, but to plain folk. The angel told the shepherds they would see the Lord as "a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). His first home was a dirty stable and not a grand palace. How different it all was, far from what the Israelites, who had read the prophecies of old, had expected. And He still comes to all who turn to Him in repentance and faith wherever they are. Not only to the rich or middle-class homes only, but also to the slum dwellings and even the gray prison cells. It is the poor in spirit, the meek and the mourners, who will see the Kingdom of God and its King come into their lives. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that God in Christ came to dwell with the sick to heal them, with the care-ridden to rid them of care, with the hungry to feed them and with the handicapped to restore them.

Think of the marvel of it all. The mighty God is with us! The same Jesus Who once walked on earth, healed the sick, taught His disciples, comforted the sorrowing, has not left us as orphans. He promised never to leave us nor to forsake us (Matt. 28:20). He lives within us (cf. John 14:16).

The Word of God has much to say in regard to stilling the fears resulting from the bad news we so often hear. If we live in the light of the Gospel of hope that we confess we believe, our fears will dissolve. Why should we ever doubt or despair when Christ is present? Christian parents will tell their little one who is afraid to be left alone when they leave the room, "But you do not have to be afraid, because God is here." We don't have to be afraid! When we look at our Immanuel in every kind of situation – to set our sights and affection on Him – we are ready to celebrate Christmas! And then the 12th century hymn will take on new meaning:

O come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.
O Come, O Branch of Jesse' stem,
Unto your own and rescue them!

From depth of hell your people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

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