

Christmas Eve

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If we attend carefully to the story of the first Christmas, we notice that the ancient story is like ours. It's also a story of people whose lives are shaped by events and people in distant places. And like modern writers who want to tell people about the effect of these events, the Bible story focuses in on one family. How did world events affect this family? Just like world events affect ours, it seems.

Joseph is a man who works with his hands in Nazareth. He originally came from Bethlehem. He had to travel home to be counted in a census ordered by some character thousands of kilometres away. Joseph lived a hundred kilometres from home because the economics of the empire forced subject people to move around.

Mary's an expecting mother; and unmarried at that! Any plans for a wedding go out the window with all that moving around. Her unborn baby is put in danger because its mother has to endure an exhausting journey on foot or jiggling on the back of a donkey. And then the child has to be born in emergency digs. Where's God in this?

Amazingly enough, here on Earth! One of the names of that baby is Emmanuel. It literally means *God is with us*. It's the baby who tells us where God is; right there at the heart of all the anxiety and fear and inconvenience. *God is with us* doesn't mean an airy fairy spirit wafting around. *God is with us* doesn't mean some old white bearded bloke in the sky, or someone like the emperor in Rome or the movers and shakers in Canberra or Washington or Beijing today. *God is with us* is the baby; completely vulnerable to the caprices of them all. Emmanuel really does mean God is with normal people; means it

in the sense that *God is one of us*.

The other day, I was talking with a young friend who feels ready to give up his faith. He can't see God getting involved in anything or caring about anything. Being this time of year, we talked about Christmas and the miracle of God coming to us in the baby Jesus. But my friend said *yes that's all very well, but God's not doing that sort of thing now*.

Strangely enough, I'd heard a story two days earlier which convinced me that God was doing precisely that right now. It was a story told by a young woman who'd just returned from serving with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel. <https://eappi.org/en/about>

This programme arranges for individuals from various countries to accompany people in Palestine and Israel as they navigate their daily routines, often under duress. These 'Ecumenical Accompaniers' (EAs) try to offer a protective presence to vulnerable communities by monitoring and reporting human rights abuses. They join Israeli and Palestinian partners to work in non-violent ways for peace.

Some of the hotspots they monitor are the checkpoints where day-labourers from the West Bank and Gaza who work in Israel have to cross the separation wall each day. The main checkpoints are now called terminals where huge numbers of people are processed every day. The one between Bethlehem and Jerusalem sees about 8,000 people a day pass through a series of steel tunnels, turnstiles and holding pens as they are 'processed' before going to work.

The young woman who told this story had just come back to Australia. A week earlier, she'd been monitoring the Bethlehem checkpoint. People start arriving there at about 2.00 or 2.30am because you can never tell how long it will take to be processed. The steel tunnels you have to queue up in are

jammed with people but once you get through a turnstile into the first holding pen, it's even worse. The closely packed crowd surges dangerously. People get seriously squashed.

Among the crowd on this particular morning, there was a mother with a tiny baby – possibly only weeks old. This was very unusual; it's not a place for such vulnerable people. To protect her baby from being crushed by the motion of the crowd, the mother was holding it above her head. But almost no-one was being let through the exit-turnstile into the next tunnel. So as time wore on, the mother's arms visibly shook more and more with the effort of holding her baby up out of danger.

A man near the exit saw this and called out to her. He motioned that he'd take the baby into the next holding area and wait for her. She really had no choice. She relinquished her screaming child, and hand over hand, it was passed from one person to the next until this man held it safely – but it was still distressed. He soon took it through the next turnstile into a less crowded tunnel, and then waited until the mother finally got through. The delay may well have cost him his job.

You remember the conversation with my young friend about Christmas, and his sadness that God doesn't do things like sending a child to transform evil any more? The young Ecumenical Accompanier woman's story told me that God still does exactly that – and in Bethlehem again, of all places.

The child and the mother were the same frighteningly vulnerable people – the dangers they faced still came from living under occupation. The trust she had to place in the kindness of complete strangers was just as precarious. And the goodness that transformed those miserably oppressed people into a community of care and compassion sprang from the same source. The child was in that moment the Christ-child again, enabling down-trodden people to embody God's care.

In Mary and Joseph's story, God is revealed through a child ready to be born; then through the love, the nurture and care of that poor, harassed couple and the support of a local, pop-up community. That's how we discover Emmanuel for ourselves too. It might seem rude of me, but my prayer for each one of us tonight is that we'll all discover we are pregnant with this possibility; each one of us.

It's the lifetime pilgrimage of every Christian to discover the Christ child growing within each of us, and within each other; to sense that child growing among us; to give birth to the child in amongst all the chaos of our life's journey, and to raise our child with love and nurture, and with the support of the community of faith. It's our privilege to receive that child as God's gift to us, and in some amazing way, to come to realise that God also receives us as a gift; you and me – Emmanuel. Amen