

God is with us – always to the end of the age

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Advent 4A: Isa 7.10-16, Mt 1.18-25

When Benjamin Disraeli was once asked if he'd read a particular book, apparently he replied, 'When I want to read a book, I write one.' May 1868, Fraser's Magazine, 670, Longmans, Green, and Co., London

I think that was Disraeli's way of saying something my parents used to say with some exasperation after I'd done something like helping with the washing – putting my new purple hockey socks into a hot wash together with the white tablecloth. After the initial shock, they'd sigh, shake their heads sadly, and say, 'When you want a job done properly, do it yourself.'

It sounded as though God felt like this in our first reading. King Ahaz of Judea is shivering in his boots about the prospect of a joint invasion by Israel and Syria. God asks him, 'Anything I can do?' Ahaz is moodily silent. God says, 'Come on, name it, I'll do it.' But Ahaz says, 'Oh no, God. I couldn't put you to any trouble.' God sighs and says, 'Okay, look, I'll come and sort things out myself. Keep your eyes peeled for someone called Immanuel. When you see him, you'll know it's me.'

In today's Gospel, we see some of the final preparations for that arrival. And the amazing thing is that God still chooses to rely on us humans – never mind that the stakes are terrifyingly high.

Early on, Matthew gives us the translation of Isaiah's prophecy; ^{1.23} the child will be called Emmanuel, which means *God is with us*. Suddenly I remember that the very last verse

of Matthew's Gospel says it again. The resurrected Jesus tells his friends, *Remember, I am with you always—to the end of the age. God is with us* in Jesus: this is the frame on Matthew stretched his canvas. His portrait of Jesus is stretched on a frame where top and bottom, and all the way down, the scaffold is this: in Jesus, *God is with us*. But how? It's different for each of us.

For the young girl Mary, *God with us* saw her body stretched and transformed, not to mention seeing her life turned inside out.

But it was something she accepted. In Luke,^{1.38} last week, we read together that Mary chose to accept God's call to become the mother of Jesus. It was Mary's first act of discipleship to Jesus, and it also made Mary his first disciple.

The implications of her choice for us are immense. Immanuel – *God with us* first dwelt in Mary. She carried the Christ to us. And in a way, we say that Mary has carried us too. We call ourselves the body of Christ ^{1 Cor 12.27}. So each of *us* can be his face to the world. It just takes a yes, as our mentor Mary has shown us.

She carried Jesus to the place where, on Tuesday night, we'll celebrate our beginning with her – Bethlehem. But today, we still wait for the one who dwells in Mary to come and dwell among us. Mary's model of discipleship is one that we must own for ourselves. She chose to receive him. Advent has been our time to prepare to receive him too; to receive discipleship as our vocation. Because he's coming to us as surely as ever he did to Mary.

What about Joseph. Today, in the struggles of Jesus' second disciple, Joseph, we see that receiving discipleship can mean a change of perspective on our entire life. If Joseph had been what the Scribes and Pharisees called righteous, he'd have had Mary publicly stoned to death. He didn't do that. And he

wouldn't have Mary publicly disgraced either. His righteousness is initially described as turning his back on Mary – 'he planned to dismiss her quietly'. But as it happens, that sort of righteousness wasn't enough for God. So God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to help him learn a righteousness of a totally different order.

Joseph was called to choose compassion for the vulnerable young woman, and to accept a life for himself that he could never have imagined before. He was to share in her public shame. God called him away from a righteousness of legalism to a righteousness of faith – to relying on God's judgement – which is actually mercy – rather than society's callous verdict on how upstanding he was.

So, like Sarah and Abraham before them, Mary and Joseph were given a child that they could only choose to receive through a choice for *God* above all other priorities. And that child would be Emmanuel; *God with us*.

For Mary and Joseph, *God with us* demanded compassion for the vulnerable at the most personal level; Mary for the baby she would bear, and Joseph, for the young woman that the law said he should have executed. *God with us* demanded risky kindness and mercy – *God with us* demanded that they be prepared to face public disgrace together in order to live that risky kindness out.

You could see this as God butting in on Mary and Joseph's lives for God's own purposes. But it actually happened for reasons of grace, and it *did* happen with their consent. God called them to a partnership which blessed them, and which has been a blessing to all our forebears, to us, and which will bless all who come after us.

What strikes me in this story, though, is that God takes risks too – God relies on us. (*When I want to read a good book...*) We don't have an invulnerable, snooty, aloof God; we have a risk-

taking, vulnerable, sleeves-rolled-up team-worker of a God.

And that has to shape our response to God – imitation; discipleship. God's purposes are mercy and compassion for the powerless; so they must be our motivation too. God's way is to take risks; that's something we prepare for at this Advent time too.

There are things God calls all of us to do, and they involve compassion and risk. Try working for God's compassionate justice in any organization and you'll see what danger you find yourself in. Try caring for someone who's oppressed, for an environment that is being pillaged and ruined; try working for a future that is worth leaving to tomorrow's children, and you will find yourself at once in trouble and in paradise. This is the paradox of discipleship, which has both a new-born hope, and a dreadful crucifixion at its heart.

Are we prepared? In all of these endeavours, in the paradox and the unreasonable demands, we need to remember the frame that Matthew's Gospel is stretched on this frame – *God is with us* à â ß à. Are we prepared to allow this message to stretch us too? Are we prepared to share it with the poor, the vulnerable, with God's suffering creatures?

When I want a good picture, I paint it myself.

Actually, our own picture is something that God wants to paint together with us – and then stretch it on that frame *God is with us – always to the end of the age.*

Are we prepared to paint this picture with God? What do we say?

Amen