

Mat 1:23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

When our eldest daughter Bethany was 19 or so, she belonged to a social group called Leisurelink, which was for young people like herself, who had some form of disability. A couple of her friends were going to move into an apartment in Goulburn and asked Bethany to go in with them. It was with some misgivings that we gave her our blessing to join them. We figured you have to let your kids leave the nest sometime, even if they do need a little more support than most.

The arrangement was not without its problems. One of the flatmates was a little more worldly wise than most, and one day when Bethany had run out of cash, he offered to go to the ATM for her. 'Just give me your PIN', he said, 'and I'll be right back with your cash.' He did indeed come back with her cash, but helped himself to \$1000 while he was at it.

When I discovered the large withdrawal, I asked Bethany about it, and it became obvious what her friend had done. I told her she'd have to confront him and get her money back. "I can't, Mum!" she wailed. She was a little afraid of him. So I said, "Ok then, let's make a time to meet with your friend and his parents and I'll go with you."

I confronted the lad in front of his parents on Bethany's behalf (mentioning such things as CCTV, time stamps and the potential for prison if we pressed charges!) It put the wind up him, and he agreed to Pay Bethany back in installments. So the story had a happy ending for all concerned.

The point of the story is that there are times when there are things we just can't do, so we need an advocate - someone to be with us - to do for us that thing which we cannot do for ourselves.

No doubt many of us have had similar experiences - we've walked with someone who's been doing it tough. We've shared a bedside vigil with a friend or relative; we've helped look after grandchildren for their stressed parents; or we've simply sat and listened as someone has unloaded. When a friend or relative has been unable to cope on their own, we've been there for them.

Whether we're a seven years old or seventy seven years old, when we are stressed or going through a tough time, the thing that helps us the most is to have someone WITH us during those times; an arm to lean on, a shoulder to cry on; someone simply to encourage us and to help us see things in a different light; someone who will advocate for us when we are beyond our own resources.

What we experience on a personal level we can also experience on a national level. Some time ago I was listening to a fascinating programme on SBS. It was about a 90 year old retired German politician who had been an amazing leader in his time. He had recently received a letter from a young person pleading with him to re-enter German politics. The letter said that his wisdom and guidance was desperately needed for their nation. This

young person recognised the value of having someone with wisdom and experience walk with them as a nation through their difficult times.

The nation of Israel also experienced times of great darkness, times of slavery and oppression, times when they cried out to God to come to their aid - but the old covenant required the Israelites hold to their side of the bargain. They were to put God first, and serve him only if they were to experience his blessing and protection. But the Israelites just couldn't keep it up. For a long time, it seemed there was no hope.

From the very beginning, however, God knew their weakness, and in his grace, had a plan to save them: In Ezekiel 36 we read this promise from God:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

How was God going to do this? We find the answer in today's Gospel reading, Matthew 1:23 says, **"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."**

When the time was right, God came to earth. He took on human flesh. He walked among us and was WITH us. He transformed lives wherever he went. Aside from the people who were physically healed, think for a moment about some of the people Jesus spent time with, and how just his presence with them brought about a transformation.

- There was Mary Magdalene – a prostitute whom Jesus set free from a life of degradation. In Jesus presence, she found forgiveness and self respect.
- There was Mary of Mary and Martha, who found the freedom to sit at Jesus feet and *learn*, in an era when women weren't educated.
- There was the apostle Peter, shattered after denying his Lord three times. Jesus deliberately sought him out once he'd risen from the dead. He gently restored him, and Peter became one of the greatest leaders the church has ever known.

In recent weeks, I've appreciated the testimonies of some of our own folk, who have stood up in church and thanked us for our prayers during their times of illness or struggle. On each occasion, we have been warmed and affirmed by their strong sense that God has walked with them during these times, giving them strength and hope.

Jesus is Immanuel – “God with us”.

At God's appointed time, Jesus entered the world and ultimately paid the penalty for our sin by giving up his life. We know this wasn't the end of course. It was in fact the fulfillment of his promise in Ezekiel. Once sin was dealt with, and Jesus was raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit was given, available to all, cleansing us, putting a new heart within us, and empowering us.

God WITH us is what separates Christianity from every other world religion! All other religions are essentially 'self help' programmes. They are religions where the participant is always reaching for God, usually though adhering to a list of rules or requirements Their rewards are dependent on their performance in this life.

But in Christianity, it is God who takes the initiative. God reaches for us. He comes to us. He invades our darkness with his light.

In one of the reading set for the 9 lessons & Carols tonight, we read this: **The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.** (Isa 9:2)

When Jesus entered the world on that first Christmas morning, he blew away the darkness with his light. He took on human flesh, and entered this world in person. He came to be WITH us.

This wonderful message of hope also comes with a challenge, though.

For those of us who have embraced the presence of God with us and within us, there is something else; something that goes deeper than just believing this message of hope.

Jesus did not leave the world to its fate once he returned to heaven after his resurrection. He left behind an army of people to continue to be his presence in the world. The Christian Church - those who have Christ living within them - have a mandate from Jesus to be his ongoing physical presence in this world till he returns. WE are his hands and feet. It is our calling as God's people to continue to minister to the poor, the sick, the lonely, the outcast, the hurting and the broken - for him.

Jesus continues to be with us and with this world, through his church.

The angel told Mary, They will call him Immanuel"— which means, "God with us." This is the message of Christmas. It is a message for us personally, which we hold onto in our own times of struggle. But it is also a message which compels us to be channels of that presence to others through our willingness to love and serve those in need.