

Lord God, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit we will be aware of your gift to us, Jesus Christ, in the middle of our lives. Amen

- Well the excitement is mounting! Father Christmas is filling his sacks in preparation for a busy night. The turkeys are lined up plucked and ready for the queues outside Chapmans. Tesco is relentlessly piping seasonal music into the store and the pubs are restocking in preparation for the next three nights. What could be more jolly or Christmassy? After all, isn't this what it is all about?
- If you find it hard to identify with this then, panic not, you are not alone!
- If you are not expecting your Christmas to be all that great, or if you look at the perfect Christmas advert style Christmas, and find it alien to what you have, think of Mary and Joseph! There's must have been a Christmas they remembered with a shudder, even allowing for the birth of the Son of God, for the rest of their lives. Think of the scandalized gossip they had to endure.
  - An unmarried mother in those very conservative days was a scandal indeed. Imagine the scornful looks in the market place as Mary waddled past. The occasional stone narrowly missing the back of her head.
  - Imagine the men in the tavern as Joseph walked in, in years to come. "You know he married that slut. More fool him. It'll come to no good. Silly fool. Why didn't he disown her like any normal person?"
  - Let alone the horrendous trek to Bethlehem, sleeping under the stars, the desperate search for some shelter when they got there, the uncomfortable and dirty birth amongst the manure of the stable, the refugees fleeing from the jealous cruelty of Herod.
- And all around them people heedlessly ignoring them, busy with whatever their own agendas dictated. The fact that you're here means that you have an overriding belief that God is involved in your daily lives. Your story.
- This is the same as Mary and Joseph. But they could be forgiven for wondering why it had to be this way.
  - Wouldn't it have been so much simpler, more beneficent, more sympathetic to their poverty stricken plight if it had been more regular, more secure. A nice stable home instead of just a stable! A bit of divine intervention and a better paid job for Joseph would have meant they could have raised Jesus in a much more settled way and have given him so many more resources on which to draw in his adult life.
- Well sadly, God doesn't often seem to work like that. We do not trust in the God of the perfect Christmases, rather we hope in the God of surprises who rolls up his sleeves and immerses himself in the grit of what is actually real life for the vast majority of humanity, unless you happen to be a TV advert.
- He did it with Jesus because he also does it in similar ways in countless other situations as well. It's all part of the bigger overarching story of the bible. The story of the Old Testament could be summed up like this:
  - God created a wonderful astonishingly beautiful world but we spoiled it by taking the glory for ourselves rather than giving it to God.
  - God gave us guidelines to live by, which we call the Ten Commandments and the Law as a temporary measure until the right time, the time for his plan to save the whole world from self-destruction. However we aren't very good at keeping these laws.
  - In the meantime he saved one family, the family of Noah from the flood and then one chosen tribe, the Israelites from slavery in Egypt before the right time came to save the whole world.
  - And in the meantime he chose one man, Abraham, and one nation, the Israelites, as a way of preparing to choose the whole world
- And nearly every Old Testament story, and nearly every story of our lives today, is a small part in the lead up to the amazing plan of God to save the whole world and bring us back to the way of life for which he created us.
- Take the small section of Isaiah we heard today in our first reading.
- The Israelites had divided as a nation. Rather like the Church. Rather like many families today.
- The Northern Kingdom of Israel was being threatened by the Assyrians, as were their neighbours, the Syrians. They formed an alliance and asked the Southern Kingdom of Israel, known as Judah, to support them. Ahaz, the

king of Judah wasn't in such danger from Assyria and refused, so the Northern Israelites and the Syrians started a civil war with the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the King of Judah is worried.

- Are you with me? Don't worry if you are confused! Just hang on to the fact that Ahaz, king of Judah was being attacked in a civil war and was frightened.
- It is at this point that Isaiah the prophet, or as we would call him today, the political pundit, steps onto the scene. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'before the year is out the threat will have gone away and *'the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.'* And you'll know this will be true because, *'the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.'*"
- And so it happened. It is quite likely that the young woman was the king's wife and her son was Hezekiah, the future king of Judah, who himself tried hard to follow the Law but in turn did some very foolish and self-centred political things, which Isaiah also commented on, which ultimately resulted in the fall of Jerusalem.
- What we have here is not the God of the perfect Christmases who makes everything end happily ever after, but rather the God who has a plan, in which you and I, and Ahaz and Hezekiah, and Mary and Joseph are a small part. The God who doesn't desert us despite how many foolish and self-centred things we do!
- The Israelites were constant in their belief that God was going to send them a Saviour. A Saviour from their present troubles, which he did time and again, and their term for this Saviour was the Messiah. And the Greek word for Messiah is Christ. The narrowest point in the egg-timer shape of God's plan to save the world because from the bible's point of view, all history that has gone before in the Old Testament, and all the future after the birth of the Christ, including what we living now, is affected by this one cataclysmic event in history. The birth of the Son of God, the Saviour above all other Saviours born of a virgin in impoverished Israel.
  - People searched the Old Testament scriptures for indications that God was going to send such a Saviour, a Messiah, a Christ, and this verse from Isaiah is one of the key texts.
- Have you noticed something rather crafty that Matthew the Greek speaker does to Isaiah the Aramaic speaker?
- Isaiah prophesied, *'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.'* This was written in Aramaic, the language of large parts of the Old Testament. It was translated into Greek, I think about 100 years before Jesus. The Greek word for young woman is the same as the Greek word for virgin. And Matthew writes, quoting Isaiah, *'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'*
- Both Matthew and Luke talk of Jesus being born of a virgin. Do they do this because there was some gossip floating about, even after the resurrection that this pretender Jesus wasn't even from a kosher Jewish background. Do they do it to emphasize that Mary hadn't been playing the field?
- Whatever the motive, the Christian belief is that Jesus is not the son of Joseph, but the Son of God. The culmination of the story of the Old Testament. God's plan to save the whole world. That's what the virgin birth points to. And save it he has, by showing that love and forgiveness have power even over sinful human beings and death. Whatever we do to God, ignore him, abuse him, betray him, even kill him, nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are once again made whole, redeemed, forgiven and returned our self-esteem. If God loves us even after the cross, we really must be lovable.
- The world is not yet the Kingdom of God it was created to be. Life is not yet perfect. But one day Jesus will return and complete the work he has begun and our sure hope is that we are not yet at the end of the story.
- In the meantime Emmanuel has shared with us. God really is with us. That's what the title 'Emmanuel' means.
  - Christ has shared the grit and puzzle of the celebration of Christmas. In the stable of our lives, the infant is there at the centre, immersed in the manure and the straw.
- Whatever your Christmas will be like, remember that and remember that your story is part of the one big story, the story of the salvation of the whole world. For surely the fiction of the perfect Christmas of the TV ad is just that. A fiction. And Christ was born not for a fictional story but a real life story and we can claim him as our own. So I don't wish you a happy Christmas. Rather a peaceful and Christ-centred one. And which would you prefer?