

“And they will call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God With Us.”

These words from the prophet Isaiah, who we have spent a good deal of time with in our daily readings through this past month, will have struck his contemporaries very differently than they do in our own day. When we hear this declaration from the prophet, we understand him to be referring to what our gospel lesson describes. Our minds go to a pasture at night and a joyful declaration made by a host of angels. We think of the exhortation do not fear, go and see him, this newborn babe.

However, in Isaiah’s time, what did ‘God With Us’ mean? In Israel’s history there are a couple of times that God comes to dwell among his people.

The inauguration of the people of Israel, as such, occurs after God has delivered them out of Egypt. No more are they a single family with attendant servants and relatives. They have become through their time in Egypt a nation – a people. They were become so numerous that the Pharaohs feared them, and consequently enslaved them. Yet, God had delivered them, provided for them a leader in Moses and brought them out to make their way to the land of promise. And so they come to Mount Sinai. A new covenant is to be made, not with one man, but with the whole people. They are given the law, and if they will follow this law God will bless and guide them. And so God is to come amongst them. This is recorded in Exodus 19.

“And be ready against the third day: for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.¹² And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death...

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.¹⁷ And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.¹⁸ And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.”

In this manner God entered into the tabernacle, and dwelt with his people. He guided them day and night with a pillar of cloud and of flame. He brought them through drought and famine, battles and sieges, and always there was fear and the dim smoke of incense and heavy curtains and the distance which could never be bridged by the people into the holy of holies.

Much time passed, the people wandered in the wilderness for decades due to their own faithlessness, they entered the promised land, established cities and towns, took for themselves a King, and it was time to build for God a temple in which to dwell in the heart of the capitol city. After seven years of construction, the temple is

complete. Solomon, the King of Israel, stands over prepared sacrifices and beseeches the Lord to come and dwell again with his people in this temple.

“Now then, O Lord God of Israel, let thy word be verified, which thou hast spoken unto thy servant David.¹⁸ But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!..

Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the house.² And the priests could not enter into the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house.³ And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever. Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord.⁵ And king Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep: so the king and all the people dedicated the house of God.”

Thus did God enter into the house built among his people - amidst fire and smoke, blood and trumpets. This is Emmanuel – God with us. And God did abide with his people. He gave them victory over their enemies and blessed their king with wisdom. While he was with his people he prospered them, and the worship which was offered at the temple was according to the law which God had given. Yet, the people could not come near to God. He would dwell among them, but there were yet terraces and divisions and perils even in the temple. Uzziah the King found out what dangers the sin of presumption posed. He sought to go further in, and offer incense himself, but was immediately struck with leprosy by God.

And as the people were determined to worship other gods, and rejected the commandment of The Lord, God's presence departed. Ezekiel the prophet records in chapter 10 the departure of God's glory from the temple, and the subsequent judgment which befalls his people. Once again the people are cast into darkness by their own faithlessness. Defeat, Slaughter, Exile and slavery are the heritage of God's departure. As they struggle under the rule of harsh and indifferent foreigners, they long for the promise of Isaiah. When will God again come among his people?

Nearly one thousand years after Solomon, God's glory once again comes among his people. “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.” This is the glory which always heralded the coming of God. And of course the shepherds are afraid. Where are the sacrifices? Where is the incense? Where are the offerings which would keep us clean before God when he comes among us?

Yet the angels are there to announce a new Emmanuel. They command the shepherds – “Fear not”. This is certainly not a command that has ever before accompanied God’s coming. Fear not? Upon what basis do we receive God without fear?

What’s more, the angels say, “Unto you is born this day...” and “you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes...” Emmanuel on this occasion does not require them to separate themselves, to stand at a distance. God’s coming is heralded with an invitation? Come near. Come see this wondrous thing, peer into the manger and see the holiest of holies for yourself. For truly all that was glorious and holy in the temple is gathered together in the person of Christ. This is, in the words of St. Stephen, the temple not made with hands.

What a glorious and strange reversal. The presence of God in Christ becomes an occasion for us to draw near. We may now approach the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father. The whole history of Israel illustrates what a wondrous and significant thing it is to receive such an invitation. And what’s more this invitation is to be for all people. The gentiles from across the Negev desert recognize the same invitation in the form of a star.

And yet, St. John writes, “That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” The invitation to come into the presence of God, was often rejected. This majesty which made the mountains to smoke, was mocked, jeered, tortured and killed. Those people who had been prepared to receive God’s presence throughout their history, failed to recognize it in the person of Christ.

Yet, perhaps the greatest offense was from those who were merely disinterested. Who could not be bothered to care. As Our Lord says in Revelation, because you were neither hot nor cold, I will spew you from my mouth. On a couple of occasions, Christ describes the Kingdom of God as a feast to which many are invited. The damned are those who are too busy to come, as St. Matthew’s gospel describes them “But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise.” Shepherds who said, “you go ahead, I’ll stay back with the sheep.” Or Magi who opted to remain in the comfort of their palaces and observatories.

Throughout this season of Advent we have discussed the coming of Christ in various ways. The historical coming of Christ, the call to prepare for the second coming and judgment, and even the manner in which he comes among us now. Fr. Chris last week reminded us that when Christ institutes this celebration of Holy communion he is commanding an anamnesis, a sacrament which not only represents his body, but also re-presents his body. And truly, it is not much more strange for God to come to us wrapped in the bread and wine, than it was for him to come as a helpless baby in a stable.

This is Emmanuel – God with us. The same majesty and glory which entered the tabernacle and the temple, now comes among us. Yet, he has provided the sacrifice for us, that we may come near and receive him. In Christ is both the Glory in the cloud, and the priest slaughtering the lamb. It is a part of the Christian’s work of

faith that we may recognize these realities in our churches, even though they are obscured by the humanity which God uses to minister to his people.

The humanity of Christ was the great stumbling block to his contemporaries. The objections which were raised when Our Lord claimed to be the Messiah invariably stemmed from this fact. “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”, “And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?”

The humanity of the church is often the great stumbling block which the world today also faces. From the ministers to the laity, we do a poor job of bringing Christ into the world. We fail so often, and are so profoundly unworthy to represent our Lord. Yet it has been the design of God to use lowly vessels – such as stables and mangers – through which to enter into creation. And thus, he uses us.

And so this morning, I invite you, as the angels did, to come near to Our Lord. Go and find him in the sacrament of his table. Receive him with humility and thanksgiving. For, as St. John says in our Gospel lesson, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.”