

Christ Mass

25 12 09

Almighty God,
you have given us your only-begotten Son
to take our nature upon him
and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin:
grant that we, who have been born again
and made your children by adoption and grace,
may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit.

My text may be found in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 23:

‘ “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son
And his name shall be called Emmanuel”
(which means God with us)’.

Happy Christmas! At last, Christmas morning is here and all that’s left for us to do after the service is to survive the Christmas lunch. I do love Christmas with all the glitter that goes with it: the tinsel, the colourful decorations and sparkling lights everywhere. The word ‘Christmas’ in English is simply ‘Christ’s mass’, literally the service of Holy Communion in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. But what I find puzzling from my text this morning is, according to the prophecy from Isaiah 7 v12 which Matthew is quoting directly, that his name should be Emmanuel.

Everyone knows that the name Joseph and Mary gave their little boy at his circumcision on 1st January, eight days after his birth, was Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua. Significantly, Joshua and Jesus mean 'God is salvation' which to me seems particularly apt given that Jesus is our Saviour. I like the idea too that the Saviour not only of the Chosen People of God, the Jews, but of all Mankind should have a Greek name thereby implying that his significance reaches out beyond Galilee and Judea to the whole world.

Jesus' surname, Christ, was given to him in recognition of who and what he was. Christ is the Greek form of the Jewish word, 'Messiah', and means anointed one. Kings and priests are anointed when they take up their office and we are all anointed with the oil of Chrism when we are baptised and confirmed. Christ is, therefore, one of several Christological titles which indicate certain truths about Jesus.

So too Emmanuel, God with us, tells us an important truth about Jesus. It is true that when the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, he was told to name the boy Jesus because 'he will save his people from their sins' – exactly! But Matthew goes on to write 'All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘ “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son
And his name shall be called Emmanuel”
(which means God with us)’.

Matthew, as his wont, is quoting from the Old Testament. Matthew, a Jew writing for a Jewish/Christian audience, is keen to show that Jesus is fulfilling the many

Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. The fact that a virgin shall conceive is just one of them. But what interests me is the name given to the boy in the prophecy from Isaiah is Emmanuel – God with us – and this is precisely what Jesus is. Not only is Jesus our Saviour but he is also the embodiment of God, he is literally, actually, God present among us. To be present among us is the essence of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. What distinguishes Christianity from other religions is that our understanding that God has made himself known through the birth, life and death of his Son. What is distinctive about the Christian revelation of God is God is present with us in the person of his Son Jesus. And that is precisely what Emmanuel means!

This Christmas, then, I'd like you to reflect on the truth told to us in names. I'd like you to think through the meaning hidden in the name 'Jesus the Christ – Emmanuel'. I'd like you to wonder and marvel at the revelation that the Son of God is our Saviour, the anointed one of God, who is in fact God with us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

25th December, 2009

H: Sermon 21: Christ Mass

