

Sermon 18/12/16 – Immanuel – God with us!

Prayer:

Is it really less than two months since the US elections?? So much seems to have happened – but back then I felt really sorry for the American voters – how do you decide who to vote for when you fundamentally don't trust, and vigorously don't like, both options?? I'm sure you have faced similar decisions – one where both choices are equally unattractive, where you judge you have to choose the "lesser of two evils!"

In 734 BC this was the dilemma facing king Ahaz. To the east lies the rising power of Assyria that is annexing and laying waste every country it can. To the north the kingdoms of Syria and Israel have joined forces and want him to join their alliance to fight the rising power of Assyria – but he knows that they want to depose him and install a puppet king. What should he do??

If the international scene isn't bad enough, within his land is the pesky prophet Isaiah who is prophesying the destruction of the land of Judah, but saying that a remnant will remain, a shoot will arise from the stump of Jesse, that is King David's line.

Two equally undesirable enemies about to attack from outside, and a kingdom divided within – who'd be a ruler in the Middle East!! Reflecting on it Ahaz decides Assyria is his best bet... the trouble is he's not listening to God! In the verses before God has already warned him of the dire consequences of either option, now, as our reading starts, God says "ask me for a sign!" – but Ahaz, with a false piety born of his own stubborn heart says, "Oh no, I mustn't put God to the test!" – really?? When God has told you to??

Enter Isaiah, frustrated!! He's already challenged Ahaz to listen to God and he has refused to listen, so now Isaiah tells him forcibly that whether or not he likes it, God is going to give him a sign, which our translations do not quite do justice to: "The young woman (in Hebrew, "Alma") has conceived and is giving birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel".

You know if I were a king wrestling with international political decisions I think I'd shrug my shoulders at that – errr... so what, a young woman is having a baby?? The first thing we need to realise is that God had already told Isaiah to "Go tell this people: Be ever hearing but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." The message is in code – a code that had

relevance at the time, and a much longer term meaning too. The meaning at the time was simple – there is a third way! The ‘young woman’ is the nation of Judah, the daughter of Zion, and she would give birth to a remnant and God would be with them and continue his plan through them. It was a call to Ahaz to put his trust wholly in God, become part of the “remnant”, and through them God would bring salvation. As if to emphasise the point Isaiah was told to bring his son called “Shear-Jashub” with him when he gave the message – and what does his son’s name mean? “A remnant shall repent, or return”!

The rest of the verses foretell that in a very few years, by the time the child has reached the stage he can tell right from wrong, the land will be utterly devastated and the people will be reduced to scavenging whatever they can find. Judah was destroyed by the Assyrians (the one’s in whom Ahaz has decided to trust) in 701 BC – just 33 years later.

Now, before we turn to the second, long term interpretation, I want just to draw out two things we can learn about God from these few verses. The first is God’s supreme sovereignty. We’re only one chapter on from Isaiah’s vision of God upon his throne – the King of Kings. In this passage we are seeing Him summoning the nations to do his bidding. The verses which follow talk about God “whistling” to the powers of Egypt and Assyria, and speaks of Assyria as a razor to shave the land of Judah, just as a man shaves off the unwanted stubble of a beard! We need to understand God has a plan and it’s way bigger than our understanding! Our job is not to understand the plan, it is to align ourselves with it! And the second part follows from it – the call to Ahaz was to forget about the places he was looking for security, to Syria/Israel or to Assyria, and instead to put his trust wholly in God. The challenge is actually in the words immediately before the bit we read, God says: “If you will not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all!”

Both of these are challenges to us as a church and as individuals – align with God’s plan, and trust solely in Him – we’ll return to these at the end.

I want next to also explore a little of the longer term meaning of the prophecy – the one we find described in Matthew’s gospel.

Since we have just started on Matthew’s gospel it’s worth briefly reminding ourselves of the reasons Matthew wrote as he did. He is widely believed to be writing to Jewish believers of ‘The Way’ to reassure them of the Jewish roots of their faith [even though they had recently been excommunicated from the synagogue for accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah. Many non-

believing Jews thought that the persecution that they were then under was God's punishment for allowing the "apostasy" of the Christians to grow – this was a deeply troubling time in which their very faith and identity was being shaken to the core]. The first verses of Matthew's Gospel set out the genealogy through Joseph, clearly establishing the lineage back through King David – and indeed through King Ahaz. Having outlined the lineage, Matthew turns to the conception of Jesus, told from the perspective of Joseph.

I don't have the time to unpack all these verses in depth, and in any case you are very familiar with them. The critical aspect here is that Mary was a virgin – sure she was betrothed to Joseph, but they would be living separately, Mary with her parents, for about a year before the actual marriage. Then Joseph would welcome Mary to his newly established home, and they would begin their full intimate physical relationship. [To break a "betrothal" required the same process as a divorce, and the synagogue had fairly recently introduced a "private divorce" which could be done before just two witnesses – this would be much kinder to Mary as the alternative, an accusation and trial for adultery, would lead to her being stoned.]

Then comes Joseph's vision of an angel. First he is told to continue the betrothal through to the marriage stage – to "take her home". Joseph must do this to graft Jesus into the lineage of David so fulfilling the prophecies, well known to Matthew's readers, that their Messiah would be from the line of David. Then he is told to call the child "Yeshua" which derives from "Yahweh (God) is salvation" – hence the added explanation that "he will save his people (which Matthew's readers would understand as the Jews) from their sins".

And then comes the reference back to the passage from Isaiah we have already looked at. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son.."

So here we have Matthew very clearly rooting Jesus' conception both in the lineage of the Jewish history, and fulfilling a clear prophecy that a virgin shall bear a child from whom will come Salvation - clearly reassuring for his readers, but what are the implications for us?

I believe they are profound – in fact they lie at the core of what God did for us through Jesus.

Some like to see Jesus as a "good man" who went about saying wise things and demonstrating love – they see His crucifixion as simply a tragic end to an exemplary life. But if Jesus was just a man, then what are we trusting in today, what use was his sacrifice? The Jews had sacrificed millions of animals and birds, the pagan people of the area had even sacrificed their children, yet

that wasn't enough to wipe away the sins of the people – so why would one more man be enough? The only thing that could wipe away the sins of the world, the only action that could bring salvation, was the death of one so valuable to God that it would pay the price in full – his only son.

But suppose God's son had just suddenly appeared, stepping from his Tardis or whatever! How would his death relate to us, to mankind? – it wouldn't – it would be a meaningless gesture with no real implications for us at all.

The only way salvation through the death of Jesus on the cross can work is if Jesus is *both* man *and* God's son –and the only way that Jesus can be both is if he is born of woman having been conceived by the Holy Spirit – by God himself. And for mankind to grasp this it must be a woman who is a virgin – otherwise there will always be doubt about paternity, perhaps he was just a “good man”.

The virgin nature of Mary, and the sovereign action of God, lie at the very heart of our faith – without Jesus being both Man and God none of the rest has a foundation – it becomes a house of cards that the wind will just blow away!

So, what are the implications for us today, what's the “application”? We have already seen that the message in Isaiah was one of recognising that God has a bigger plan than we can possibly grasp, and that even nations are bit players answerable to his commands. We have seen that the only response from us is to seek our part in his plan and to place our trust wholly in him. Now we see, in the unfolding verses at the start of Matthew's gospel, God revealing an essential component of his plan – the role of the Christ in our salvation, founded in his nature as both God and man.

The implication must surely be the same – one first of wonder at the sheer majesty and scale of God's plan, amazement that he foretold these events 750 years earlier! That amazement has to be followed by actually putting our trust wholly in Him.

So where do we put our trust? As a business man it's easy for me to look at my savings and pension plans and think – ah we'll be OK. Or perhaps I might look to the government for my state pension, health service, or the police force for my physical safety – how foolish - such things can fall at the drop of a hat – look what God did to Judah in the space of 30 years! Maybe instead I look to my health, my intellect, my strength to be a success or a survivor – yet all of these are gifts

from God, and they may be swept away in an instant – an accident perhaps, or a debilitating sickness. Perhaps my security lies in my family, friends, my church, my community – yet they too could evaporate; maybe I'll be forced to move elsewhere far from such support!

There is only one sure place of security – in the faithful heart of God. He has promised that if I trust in him I will come through even earthly death to a new life with him. He has sent Jesus ahead so that I can be absolutely sure both of the resurrection and that the price has been paid for my many sins.

What I have to do is to act out of that absolute security, listen to God's voice in prayer, and act on it without fear. Back in July I told you the first half of the story about Russian friends we had met the previous autumn. They had shared with us two things – the first was their need to extend their house so that the authorities would approve them adopting a 13 year old orphan as their daughter, and in so doing save her from a probable life of poverty, trafficking and prostitution. The second was that the girl, Sveta, had prayed about this and was absolutely clear that God would provide the way through. Our response had been to provide them with the financial resources to extend their simple home.

In September we travelled to Kaliningrad to stay with them in their now extended house – it was simple, but well-built and provided all that they needed. But now the next challenge was the legal process – essentially an application to the courts before a judge to allow the adoption. They had no money to pay for lawyers or professional help. But God has promised to go ahead of us, to prepare the way, and to provide the words at the right time. It was time once again for stepping out in faith.

Four weeks ago we received a short but urgent message from them: "Hearing Monday. Please pray for us. They say that our judge is not a very pleasant person."

We prayed – in fact we were able to share the prayer need with 75 others at a conference the next day – we all prayed – and trusted in God's provision.

On the Monday evening we received news: "Thank you for your prayers for us! God is great! It was such a battle today..... Only after we showed the pictures of our new house to the judge, she said yes!" By the end of the week we had confirmation that all the papers were signed, and they were now officially Sveta's mum and dad. In just 15 months they had gone from desperate and

uncertain to what God was calling them to, buoyed only by the clear prophetic words of their prospective daughter, to the point where that prophecy was fulfilled.

God is like that – he is utterly generous, utterly faithful. Our part was simple – to put away our precious sense of security in our own financial provision, step out in faith, and respond to this opportunity God was giving us. He was able to use our simple gift not only to provide the house, but based on just a few photo's to shift the heart of a notoriously obstructive judge! Who knows what the longer term implications will be – how God will use the gift of prophecy in young Sveta, or how this story, this testimony, will inspire other Christians around that family – we have no idea, though I am quite sure God does.

God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign – to test God's faithfulness – but he refuses, with disastrous consequences for him and the nation. God clearly tells Joseph to trust him, and to continue his betrothal to Mary – and he does, so not only enabling a prophecy from 750 years before to be fulfilled, but laying the foundations in the virgin birth for Jesus, both God and man, to begin his earthly journey, and so buy your and my salvation.

So will you trust God, test him in this? The next time he calls you to reckless generosity, threatening your sense of security in your earnings, your savings, your pension will you trust him and respond? The next time you find yourself with an opportunity to speak out, or to act, in a way that feels foolish or dangerous, will you opt for the safety of silence, and withdraw into the shadows, or will you step forward and step out in faith as Joseph did? Will you actually trust in the words of God to Ahaz: ““If you will not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all!”?

When you do, the blessings will be more than you can possibly know – but the first step is yours – please take it today, this Christmas, and play your full part in God's amazing unfolding plan this advent.

[It is only in the Greek of Matthew's gospel that the word “Parthenos” meaning virgin is used – we have already seen that in Isaiah the Hebrew word ‘Alma’ means “young woman”. However we can be reasonably sure that the meaning was indeed intended in Isaiah as well. The word “Alma” is used in preference to the more common “Issa” meaning wife or mother, and in fact the word “Alma” is only used 9 times in the Old Testament and in those instances where the context is clear it seems to mean a “young attractive unmarried but marriageable woman”, and this by implication would be entirely consistent with being a virgin.]