

Mt 1:22-23<sup>22</sup> Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:  
<sup>23</sup>“BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” [NASB95]

I hope you like the Christmas season as much as I do! I absolutely LOVE it! The year's work is done. The music for the Christmas services is already settled. The presents are wrapped and posted. I stop nagging my wife and peace reigns...!

But, that's not it. The essence of Christmas is “GOD WITH US.” God's gift of himself, to you and to me, together with the washing away of sins, eternal life in paradise (which we cannot comprehend), a new destiny in this world and, best of all, a love that will not let me go. “GOD WITH US.”!!!

Oh! Think about the love involved! Think how much he MUST love you! Measure it. Measure the sacrifice you KNOW he made for you — even before you were born. In order to get you and me clean enough for this life and the next, God Almighty had to separate himself into Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then the Son had to leave his home in Paradise for a stable, so that the Father could SACRIFICE his SON — to pay for YOUR guilt, for the damage you have done and will continue to do. You cannot measure love direct but you CAN measure the sacrifice involved. Think about it.

Who else loves you like that?

Don't trip over incredulity. This is history. It happened outside Jerusalem before a cast of thousands.

He won't MAKE you believe it. He will ENABLE you to believe it, but you are free to reject it. Since our beginning God caused us to prosper and he coped with sin and unbelief that grew and grew til now the world itself cannot support our iniquity. Our polluting has grown to such a level that even we can see the planet beginning to asphyxiate. In our generation, the very arctic ice-shelf has shrunk to half the size it was.

Notice the timing. It began when we had learnt enough science to cope with it. In His mercy He did not let it happen before.

Those who refuse to believe in God usually do so because of the troubles and conflicts of life. Perhaps now they will better see where those troubles stem from. Not his carelessness but ours. It is not from lack of love that we get into a mess. We see in our own families that when love is rejected trouble comes. We all know it in our families: teenagers refusing to listen till it's too late. We ought to see it in the world.

So I urge you to drink deep of the Love of God this Christmas.

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Because all his gifts have an eternal dimension, every Christmas is a time of renewal, and because of Who and What is involved, it is as if, each year, He comes again to give himself to us. There is always more to take in. Just because you have not received much for a while does not mean God has run out of gifts for you. It is as if in every Christmas stocking every year there is a heavenly parcel that can be easily overlooked.

It happened at the first Christmas. The innkeeper did not recognise the parcel that was being delivered. No one can blame him for that, he did his best within his knowledge and offered his stable. But, if HE HAD known what WE know, he would have strewn the floor with flowers and made his own residence available and grovelled — before he let the Holy Family near his stable.

The Shepherds did not recognise what they saw even though the heavens themselves had trumpeted the uniqueness of this gift to mankind. They came and found the sign they had been told they would find. Afterwards, they went and told everyone what had happened so that people marvelled. But they did not come back. No one came to worship that baby except some Iraqis, who had travelled a thousand leagues to do so. THEY came and fell down and worshipped at the feet of a child they hailed as the promised King. They were not disconcerted by the lack of splendour. They were not troubled by the absence of a guard of honour. They had been personally guided (as we all are) and their guidance was sufficient for them, as your guidance will be sufficient for you. Please note: those magi would have been killed for their pains if they had paid attention to King Herod and not listened to God, not gone home another way. Yet, in the days to come, they are the ones who will be rewarded with such abundance as will make a rejected King Herod weep and wail his heart out.

It is STILL possible to overlook and miss the gift of God if you refuse to accept the gift in the way it is given. You have to accept it as it is, "GOD WITH US." You have to accept it will come by the Spirit and will not have a material form. You have to accept he can come harmless and weak as a babe. Do not treat him as you would an earthly VIP. He is very approachable, eager to hear you. He may even wait outside, as it were, knocking on the door, as was written to the Church of Laodicea:

Re 3:20<sup>20</sup> 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. [NASB95]

Invite him in. You need to believe he has no HIDDEN agenda, no desire to dragoon you into being other than yourself. All his agenda is displayed in the hymns we have sung today. It is true, he wants you to grow with him and be transformed into the person you were always meant to be. THAT might prove a bit of a shock to your family, and an even bigger one to you! But, when he walked the earth he walked it as an ordinary human, filled with the power of the Spirit as ordinary humans are supposed to be filled. He wants this for everyone of us. That's why he used to say, "Follow me." It is easier to obey than to understand.

You must accept he comes to share your life for ever and for always. To be with you, to eat what you eat, drink what you drink. If you follow him, YOU must be prepared to eat and drink what HE does.

There IS an agenda but it is not hidden, it's brief and to the point: in the power of this gift you WILL "love God with all your heart and soul, and mind, and your neighbour as yourself." HOW you do it is entirely up to you. Just bear in mind that loving someone means pleasing THEM, not yourself. It will involve some sacrifice, though nothing as much as it did for Him.

You may or may not have thought of it like this. You may have thought you have to learn more about God. Such a God can seem too immense to cope with. In fact, you are supposed to trust and obey directly, just like the early disciples, rather than learn more facts. It is practical, on-the-job, training. If you do NOT deal with him direct, you may miss out on a great deal, just as the shepherds did, because they could not recognise God in a humble, new-born babe. I would probably have failed equally. The mature Lord can appear very diffident in his approach to us, just as he did on the road to Emmaus, Lk 24.28. We have to accept that. Immanuel is a man.

LASTLY, when you have worked out that God loves you more than you thought, and have let your response blossom in return (perhaps enough to want to read his word in a new way), you will wonder how you might best please Him next. When that happens, do not wait for a sign or guidance. You already know what you should be doing. Once you love God as you should, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. He is not going to give you new commands if you don't obey the ones he has already given, every Christian's 'Standing Orders.' At home and abroad, love your neighbour as yourself. Work at it. Especially at Christmastide. Look around at your

neighbours now. Do you think some of them might pose a problem? I think you could be right. But can you see the problem you pose for them?! Learn to give freely. Learn to copy Immanuel in practice, not just in theory.

Greet them as if you were glad to see them! If this is difficult, practice on the dog or cat and see the difference a good dose of attention does for them! As you feed on the renewed love and joy you carry in you, you will be able to share it around, and pray and sing with extra gusto hymns like the one with which we are going to end. If we enter into this wholeheartedly we will become the catalysts of change we were meant to be.