

LUKE 1:26-38
DAWNING OF IMMANUEL

“I’m pregnant!” Two words that change the world. For some people, these are words that open up a new world of family and bring huge delight and a sense of expectation; the longed-for baby will add a new dimension to family life and the prospective parents are delighted. This is even more so, for some who have longed for a child for years and years and it had seemed that it was not going to happen and then finally it does and that sense of delight is heightened and these two words encapsulate a world of dreams come true against all the odds. A daughter tells her mum and there is another kind of joy and delight in sharing that good news and for her mum the prospect of a grandchild. The world will never be quite the same again: when our first child was born, a friend sent us a card with the legend “Glad to see that the partnership is under new management” and only as family life went on did we realise just how true that would be. This is the joy and delight of family life that began with these two words – “I’m pregnant”.

But these same two words can carry very different emotions in other circumstances. For the woman who is a victim of rape these words are the last words that she ever wanted to utter and they carry with them all kinds of pain and despair. For someone who is caught up in poverty and perhaps is already a single parent, the last thing she needs is another baby, another mouth to feed. For someone who is taking part in an illicit relationship and not knowing the attitude of the man who is the father of her child, these two words open up a whole world of fear and uncertainty; or a woman who is married and knowing that the father of her child is not her husband! These two words change the world and bring into her world all kinds of fears and anxieties.

We read the story of the Annunciation – the angel announces to Mary that she will become pregnant, that she will have a Son and he tells her something of who her son will be! We’ll come back to that later, but let’s dwell for a moment on that first reaction. Mary is visited by the angel; Gabriel is God’s messenger, charged with bringing to Mary ‘good’ news; she will have a son! See Mary’s reactions: “*Mary was...*” (Luke 1:29) Later “*How will...*” (Luke 1:34) This is not easy and straightforward for Mary; we’ll get to her dedication later, but it’s a mistake to get there too quickly. Her first reaction is not “Super, wonderful; how blessed am I” Her first reaction is “What on earth are you talking about? How can this be? What will happen to me now?” She knew that she had never been with a man; she knew that she was engaged to Joseph, with all the expectation of being faithful. What would happen when she uttered these two words to Joseph – “I’m pregnant”?

From what we know of Joseph’s reaction there was part of Mary that was quite right to be afraid! Every emotion in Joseph is telling him that Mary has been unfaithful to him and that he shouldn’t believe her story. So we’re told that “*because he...*” (Matthew 1:19) He would do it quietly but he would divorce her because his world had fallen apart with these two words. There is no other way it could happen but by Mary being with another man! The Law gave him the power to divorce her and every semblance of decency meant that is exactly what he should do and Mary’s prospects of husband, family, a settled and secure life were over before they’d even begun. I don’t want to dwell on this point too much, but this is background against which we have to see the Annunciation story; this is the start of the dawning of Immanuel!

“*I am...*” (Luke 1:38) “We are apt to take this as the most natural thing and accordingly we miss Mary’s quiet heroism.” (Leon Morris) Was it the dream of every Jewish woman, to be the mother of the Messiah? Here is Mary being given that opportunity, but she has no way of knowing how Joseph will react, how the village

will react. Will she be thrown out? Will she be misunderstood, seen as a “bad woman”? All of that is quite possible. Yet at the end of the conversation with the angel, and before she has the chance to find out the answers to these hard questions, she accepts; she expresses her complete obedience; she gives herself to serve God completely, the servant of God. Because she loves God and because she is willing to serve Him in this way, the dawning of Immanuel comes step closer. God meets Joseph in dream when Joseph is assured that Mary is telling the truth and that God is at work and her virginity is an integral part of the story and so Joseph listens to God’s word and by faith accepts what he hears. The dawning of Immanuel comes another step closer.

This is a big story. I’m not trying to do the story down by painting this background; I’m considering just how real this story is and how it touches our real world. There is nothing magical about Mary’s world; there are real issues with which she needs to deal, as well as, if not before, she delights in the good news. It is a big story that tells us some big things about Jesus. “*Do not...*” (Luke 1:31ff) It’s when we begin to investigate what these big things are that we see just how big this story is. Two words, “I’m pregnant”, when Mary said them, not only changed Mary’s world forever, but were to change the whole world forever, were to have consequences that affect us all. There are three things here about Mary’s baby that help us see just how big this story is : His name is Jesus; He will be God’s Son; He will be a gt King.

His Name is Jesus: ‘Jesus’ is a variation on Joshua, so it was a common name in Israel. But here it takes on a whole new meaning. “*You...*” (Matthew 1:21) Jesus means “God saves”. His name tells us something of the task He would come to take on. *The Shadow of the Cross* is a painting by Holman Hunt that shows Jesus in the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth; it is a work of the painter’s imagination and he has done it in such a way as to show how the shadow of the cross might hang over Jesus from the very beginning. The shape formed by the shadow of His arms on the wall; the hammer and nails in the tool rack; the thorns in the shape of a crown lying on the floor; even the woman kneeling on the floor looks as if she is kneeling at the foot of the cross. This is what Jesus came to do and when the questions was asked “who is to be saved?” He blew apart the boundaries. The question was no longer to be answered only by “Israel”, but now is for the whole world. Jesus comes to save and rescue people right across the world; He is a Saviour for people everywhere, for us. His Name is Jesus!

He will be God’s Son: How can this be? Here we are in ‘mystery’ territory. The Church has, for centuries, wrestled with this. We have believed both bits, but when we’ve tried to put them together we have struggled to understand. He is God’s Son: the whole Bible’s witness to Jesus is that He is the Son of God; there are lots of clues in the Bible to that idea. He is also a real human being, real flesh and blood; He was born in a very natural way, indeed in the same way as every other child has ever been born; again there are lots of clues in the Bible to His real humanity. The mystery question and the place where we stumble is trying to work out how He can be both at the same time. The Bible doesn’t try to understand that; the Bible simply presents these two notions as true and asks us to believe both, that the baby born in the stable in Bethlehem to Mary is God made flesh. Immanuel – God with us. Stop and ponder that idea for a moment and see just how big this is. “I’m pregnant” – God has come! The world is changed forever!

He will be a great King! He doesn’t look like a King! When the wise men went looking for the new king in Herod’s palace they were looking in the wrong place! He is no King like any we’ve ever seen before or since, but He came telling people about God’s Kingdom. “This is what life is like when God is King!” One of the big themes of

hope and expectation in Israel when Jesus came was for a king, one who would succeed the greatest King they'd ever had, King David. Jesus does not quite fit the bill as far as some are concerned, but His words carried great weight; He did deeds which demonstrated His Kingship; His resurrection was the seal on it all and His friends went around proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. The early Christians in the Roman Empire were asked to swear loyalty to Caesar – “Caesar is lord” – but the Christians refused because they knew that Jesus was king, Lord of their lives, a King greater even than Caesar. He will be a great King, God with us!

This is the dawning of Immanuel in flesh and blood. Immanuel means “God with us”. There is something awe-inspiring about that idea. What is the first idea or picture that comes into your mind when we use the word “God”? Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel? This great figure painted in the sky with power to give life to the world; is it something to do with God who made the world? Or is your idea of God some picture of God who is unapproachable, great, full of glory and majesty? It is some idea of an old man sitting on a cloud all day watching people make a fool of themselves? The reality is of God who has lived forever and who always will live; of God who made the universe; of God who is great and full of splendour and majesty, with something indeed unapproachable about Him, not that we could really put our finger on what that might be! This God, whom words cannot describe, this God full of majesty, this God who created the universe and put the stars into space, this God who has always lived – He has come into our world and has lived for thirty-three years amongst us in the shape and form of Jesus. Immanuel – God with us; that's how big this story is; it is awesome, awe-inspiring, worship-inspiring, when we grasp the reality of it!

There is also something comforting, reassuring, and hope-giving about this idea. When we wrestle with our human nature and when we get it wrong, or make mistakes, or fall short, or go down the wrong path, or let our bad habits run unchecked – the God to whom we look for forgiveness knows us; He has been here, and has lived inside our human nature and knows the struggles that we wrestle with. When life is hard and we pray, the God whom we hope will answer our prayers has been here, and knows what our world is like and understands our world. When we suffer pain or grief or oppression of any kind and we are bitter, afraid, angry and look to God to rescue us, He knows exactly how we feel because He has been there, most of all in the cross. Because Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, the whole resources of God, His power, grace, and love are on our side; He fights for us. No situation is hopeless; no circumstances need lead us to despair because of the dawning of Immanuel. This is hope-giving, faith-inspiring, this idea of Immanuel – God with us.

“I'm pregnant”. Two words that changed Mary's world for ever; two words that turned Joseph's world upside down; their story has a happy ending, blessed by God. These are two words which, when Mary said them and understood what they meant, changed her world for ever. She obeyed – what heroism; what faith; what obedience. The dawning of Immanuel on our world and in our hearts inspires faith, hope and love: faith in the God who has come into the world; hope in the God who will save us; love for the God who has loved us in the most wonderful way possible. Advent is the dawning of Immanuel on our world – God with us; He has never gone away!