

Dec 18. O come, O come, Immanuel!

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means God with us).’
Matthew 1:21-23

Do you allow yourself to hope? If so, what do you hope for? Peace, good health, wealth, comfort, or a happy marriage and family life? These can be good things for which to hope, but what happens when the thing hoped for fails to materialise, or is not wholly satisfying, or maybe a blip occurs in your health, wealth, comfort, marriage, or family life?

It may be that you enter a cycle of adjusting your hopes to account for any blip, failure, or dissatisfaction and continue pressing on in life towards the new object of hope. Another option is to not allow yourself to hope at all. Some of us know all too well the feeling of being repeatedly beaten down such that it feels futile to hope.

The Israelites in the time of Jesus (and before) knew what it was to hope. The Old Testament often talks of their desire for things like peace, prosperity and deliverance from those foreign nations oppressing them. The Old Testament also speaks of the Israelites living in the hope that there would be one called ‘Immanuel’ who would come to save them. Matthew, in writing his gospel account, often referred to the fulfilment of the Old Testament. One such example is used in the first chapter where it says that ‘the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us).’ Isaiah, the book from which Matthew lifts these words, was written about seven hundred years before Jesus was on the scene. It’s remarkable that a statement made so long ago perfectly coheres with the event of Jesus’s birth and his status as ‘Immanuel’ – God has come to earth to save.

However, for the Israelites, seven hundred plus years seems a long time to wait for their hope to materialise in Jesus. As well as the time span, there were plenty of blips, including their being exiled and conquered, which may have caused their hope of the long-awaited saviour’s arrival to dwindle. Generations of Israelites came and went without living to see the final fulfilment of God’s promise to send Immanuel. Despite this, God remains sovereign and knows the big picture. He still loves His people and does not abandon them. With the birth of this baby in an unassuming corner of the world, God shows His faithfulness and willingness to change the situation for humanity on the ground by taking to the ground Himself.

These Old Testament experiences, prophecies and promises would have rung a bell or two for the Israelites making up Matthew’s original audience as Jesus was born. Could this be the fulfilment of their hope? Many would’ve hoped Jesus was a political or military solution to delivering them from their Roman oppressors. However, those people would’ve been disappointed. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus arrived to ‘save his people from their sins.’ The greatest problem faced by the Israelites was not their material circumstances or oppression by the Romans, but sin and subsequent separation from God.

Similarly, sin and separation from God remains our greatest problem now and it’s not one we can solve by ourselves. God hates sin (this is anything we think, say or do that makes us more important than God) and His judgement dictates that there must be a penalty for rejecting Him. Romans, a book that comes later in the New Testament, says that the

'wages of sin is death.' That is to say that the end point of living in sin is death and judgement.

God knows that we cannot solve this problem and save ourselves. In his mercy and love, He provides Jesus who entered the chaos of the world. He lived a perfect and sinless life, continually calling people to turn from their old and sinful life to follow Him. His life channels towards crucifixion, where he takes on the penalty that we deserve for our sin. However, he didn't stay dead. Sin and death did not have the final say. He defeated death through his resurrection, which has paved the way for us to be right with God if we only turn and follow Jesus.

In Jesus, the long-awaited saviour of the world, there is a hope that will satisfy like nothing else and outlast any other object of hope in this life. Allow yourself to root your hope in Jesus, who later in Matthew is recorded as saying: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'