

God with us: Part 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 December 2016

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, today I'd like us to spend a bit of time looking at the words that we read in Matthew chapter 1 and we can read again at verse 22 and 23.

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, that's Isaiah, the prophet who we read. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.

And in particular, I want us to focus on the last three words, God with us. Now, Matthew is telling us in these two versions that what's taking place at Bethlehem is in fulfilment of what was prophesied just over 700 years ago by Isaiah.

And in doing so, he is emphasising a vital point that at the heart of the conception and birth of Jesus is the astonishing fact that in Jesus, God is with us.

And he is named in these terms, he is given the name Immanuel. In Hebrew, the word im means with, the word manu is for us and el is the name for God.

[1 : 27] Immanuel with us, God, God with us. And I am sure that that is something that we are very, very familiar with. We have heard this phrase many times, Jesus is God with us.

But it's a phrase that's well worth thinking about and we're going to spend a bit of time both this morning and this evening considering exactly what this phrase means.

Because you can hear a phrase like God with us very, very often. But what exactly does it mean? What does it mean for God to be with us?

And that's what I want us to ask together this morning. That phrase, those two words with us are very, very simple. But when we stop and think about it, the phrase I am with you, these two words with us or with you can actually mean a lot of different things.

And I was thinking about this and I think I could think of seven examples. There's probably more, but I can think of seven examples of what we mean, of different things that we mean when we say with us.

[2 : 42] First of all, it's probably the most obvious one in terms of location. When two people are in the same place, we say that they are with each other. Now most of the time that's being physically present in the same location, but of course with Skype and FaceTime and all that kind of stuff, you don't necessarily have to be physically in the same place to be communicating in the same location.

So that's, I think, where the first place that my mind goes. Just like we are today. We are with each other. But being in the same place doesn't necessarily mean that you are there in terms of friendship or togetherness or anything like that.

For example, in the presidential debates, Trump and Clinton were with each other on the platform, but they weren't with each other in any terms of togetherness or cooperation or friendship.

So with us, yes, it can mean the same location, but it means a lot more than that as well. So first one is location, second is in terms of experience.

Being with somebody can mean sharing the same experience. And often when we reflect on significant moments, we will come back to the fact that there was people who were with us in terms of sharing that experience.

[4 : 06] We can think about the highlights that have gone by in 2016. You can think of the oil rig coming to Delmore. You can think of the Carlaway show. We can think about Buffet weekend, the National Day of Prayer, all of these things.

We will often say, I was with you. You were with me because we shared that experience together. And that is something that applies to both good things and to bad things.

Being with each other is sharing experience. So that's number two. Number three follows on from that. We use that term with us to reflect the idea of emotional understanding.

Sharing our experience can mean that there is a sort of witness in terms of how we feel. And that's particularly true of hard times. Because one of the amazing privileges of being a minister or an elder is that you share in people's hard times.

And that's not an easy thing, but it's a very, very special thing. And people who are involved in maybe in your own jobs, medical professions or whatever else maybe will know exactly what this is like.

[5 : 16] When people are going through a hard time, you are with them in a sense that you are alongside them and you are supporting them. And that emotional understanding doesn't depend on physical togetherness because somebody might be on the other side of the world, but they might be texting you or emailing you or phoning you and giving you a huge amount of support.

So with us can mean emotional understanding. Fourthly, with us can also mean intellectual understanding.

People will often talk about being with one another in terms of understanding. We had a lecturer in college and one of his common phrases was he would be talking about something and then he would say, are you with me?

And what he meant by that was are you understanding me? And in many ways one of a preacher's big concerns is that he's not making any sense and you always hope that people are with you. And in the opposite way, we will often use the phrase, I'm not with you. And by that we mean I don't understand you. So intellectual understanding also comes into this.

[6 : 31] Okay, number five, we'll try to get through these as quickly as possible. With us can also refer to a relationship, can't it? And that's important because it applies regardless of location or of experience.

For example, imagine two people are going out, boyfriend and girlfriend. One is in America, one is in Japan. And the one in Japan goes out with his friends and they meet somebody and the people with them says, oh, why don't you go out with that girl?

She looks nice. And he'll say, no, no, no, no, I'm with so-and-so. She might be on the other side of the world, but I'm with her in a relationship and therefore we have that connection.

And that of course applies on a permanent basis in marriage. And so there's this sense of commitment when we use that word with. There's also the idea of representation because very often in a workplace people will go somewhere and they'll use the word with to describe who they are representing.

You might go on to an oil rig and say, I'm with Gordon Diesel services. Now, you're there on your own. You're not with them, but you are representing them as their employee.

[7 : 44] You might say, I'm with the Western Ass Council. I'm with the National Health Service or something like that. We use it to express this idea of representation.

And so the word with can mean I'm part of. It can mean I'm representing. It can mean I'm committed to. It can mean I'm loyal to it. All points to this idea of a relationship.

And following on from that, we have the idea that the word with expresses the idea of solidarity, the idea of supporting people and being identified with them.

A good example of that is the city and refugees. None of us are with them physically at the moment. And most of us won't ever be.

Few of us have shared their experience. We can't really say that we understand what they're going through, either emotionally or intellectually.

[8 : 46] We just don't know what that's like. And we can't say that we are in any formal relationship with them. So none of our first four or five withs apply.

But I think we would all say that when it comes to city and refugees, we are with them. And by that, we mean that we want to show them our support.

We want to express solidarity towards them. And so the phrase I'm with you can mean I am supporting you or I am identifying myself with you.

So some people might say I'm with Theresa May. Some people might say I'm with Jeremy Corbyn. Some people might never say either of those things, but it just depends on your views.

So that's six. With can be location, experience, emotional understanding, intellectual understanding, relationship, solidarity. And last of all, it can refer to the idea of intervening for somebody.

[9 : 49] With us can be used in terms of intervention. And by that, I mean going to help somebody. And we often use that language. We say, oh, the doctor is with them. Or we say the Americans are

with the coalition or with the allies.

People or groups can team up together in order to act, in order to help, in order to do something. And that's exactly what we had in Isaiah 7, because as we were saying, Syria and the northern Kingdom of Israel had come together.

And the great message of fear for the people of Judah was Syria is with Ephraim. Syria is in league with Ephraim.

They have come together and they are going to attack us. And so they are coming together to intervene in a bad way and to threaten Ahaz and his kingdom.

But God's response was, I am with you. Now, if you're relaxing on the sofa after your Christmas dinner later on, you can read 2 Kings 16 or 2 Chronicles 28.

[10:57] I'll say that again. 2 Kings 16 or 2 Chronicles 28 to find out what happened with Ahaz. Was he good or was he not good in his reaction? I'll let you explore that for yourselves.

The point I want to emphasise just now is I am with you can mean I'm going to help you. I'm going to intervene for you. So that was very fast and I hope you're still with me.

With can mean lots of things. Location, experience, emotional understanding, intellectual understanding, relationship, solidarity, intervention.

That's seven things I can think of that that word with can describe. So which with is Matthew talking about?

Well, the amazing thing is that it's all of them. Every single one of them. Jesus is with us in terms of location.

[12:04] And that's the astounding truth of that night in Bethlehem. Imagine standing outside that stable or cave or stall or whatever it was and asking the question what's in there?

And somebody might say to you, well, there's a young woman in there. There's a man in there. There's clothes in there. There's a manger in there. And God is in there.

That baby is God the son. And that is the miracle and the amazing, amazing truth of that night in Bethlehem that there in our location, in that manger, in all that poverty and all that frailness, God is there.

Now, we are very, very familiar with that, but it should stop us in our tracks and it should take our breath away. God is there.

And the astonishing thing is that God does not belong in a stable. God does not belong in a cave or whatever it was. God does not belong in swaddling clothes.

[13:15] God does not belong in a manger. He does not belong in such poverty and in such humiliation. Now, it's really important that we remember that the birth of Jesus took place in the worst conditions.

Because when we see images of the birth scene of Jesus, very often it's described as a stable and it would have been something like that for a manger to have been there. But often in our depictions of it, it's kind of a five-star stable, isn't it?

It's really nice. It's clean. It's cozy. It's lovely. But that's not accurate.

When you think of the birth of Jesus, you should be thinking, first of all, of refugees. Because that's what Mary and Joseph were. They were wandering, homeless, and had come to this town looking for a place to stay.

They were refugees. You should be thinking in terms of people who were homeless and sleeping rough because there was no room in the inn.

[14:18] And you should also be thinking filthy because a manger was a feeding trough. It wasn't a cot. It was a feeding trough.

And without going into any details, you can use your own imagination. It would be unhygienic to say the least. If you went to Bethlehem and you said, where's the worst place to have a baby?

You just said, where do the animals eat and do everything else? Suppose a good example would be imagine giving birth in a fang.

That's what it was like. That's where God went.

Why did God go to that location? Because that's where we are. And he has come to be God with us.

[15:27] And so he has come to share our location. He is with us. But he has not come in a kind of sterile bubble of strength and perfection and, like I said, a five-star stable.

He has not just come among us. He has become one of us. And it's really, really important to grasp that.

Because that means that he is with us in terms of experience. That's the miracle of who Jesus is. He is God, but he is also human.

And so that means that he is not just God where I am. He is God as I am.

He is with us in that sense of experience. And so if you ask yourself the question, where are you today in terms of experience?

[16:23] Where are you today? Maybe you are rejoicing because today is a happy day. But maybe you are lonely.

Maybe you are rested. Or maybe you are absolutely exhausted. Maybe you are at peace.

Or maybe deep down you are really worried. Maybe you are feeling good. Maybe you are feeling incredibly weak.

But wherever you are in terms of experience, Jesus can say, I've been there.

He knows what it's like. Everything that is involved in experiencing life as a human, Jesus has it because he is God with us.

[17:23] And that of course means that he is with us in terms of emotional understanding. In other words, Jesus knows how you feel.

That's a really, really important thing to remember. And it's a fascinating thing to read through the Gospels. If you finish your homework from 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 20, you finish that homework. Your next homework is to read through the Gospels and to read through all the different emotions that Jesus experienced. Was Jesus ever happy?

Yes he was. He rejoiced. You can read about that in Luke 10. Was Jesus ever angry? Yes he was. One of the examples of that is the amazing incident where children were being prevented from coming to him and that made Jesus angry.

Was Jesus ever upset? Yes he was. He was grieved at the hardness of people's hearts as Mark 3 will tell you.

[18:23] Was Jesus ever heartbroken? Yes he was. Because he wept. And we don't weep unless we are broken.

Was Jesus tempted? Yes he was in every way. And in fact temptation was worse for Jesus because he never gave in. And that meant that the temptation was all the more pressing and always there.

Was Jesus ever terrified? Now by that I mean absolutely terrified. Well you read about the garden of Gethsemane and you'll see that he was.

So what are your emotions today? Maybe it's many emotions. I suppose I have lots of emotions. At one level I am so happy today.

At another level I am a bit tired today. It's quite busy running up to Christmas. At one level I am really excited about the new year and everything lies ahead. At another level I am worried.

[19:35] Because in many ways I look back over the past year and I think about all the things I failed to do rather than the things that I may have achieved. And so we all have these different emotions in our minds.

But wherever you are, wherever you are in terms of emotions, Jesus is God with you.

And that means you can pour your heart out to him. And always remember that. You can pour your heart out to Jesus. Now when you pour something out it's not particularly tidy and not particularly neat.

Imagine pouring a bucket on this floor and we just go pfft everywhere. But that's how we can come to Jesus. We can just pour out our heart before him and tell him everything.

And he says, I know I've been there. So Jesus is with us in terms of emotional understanding. But he also shared an intellectual understanding.

[20:37] Now this is a really, really interesting thing to think about. Imagine Jesus in the manger. As we said, if you were standing outside, you could say God is in there.

God is in that manger. But he was still a baby. So he couldn't speak. He couldn't walk.

He couldn't recite the Old Testament in Hebrew. He couldn't invent the internal combustion engine. He couldn't do any of these things. And part of the humiliation of Jesus, that's the word we use to describe him, coming down from heaven.

Humble just basically means low. So coming down, humiliation. As part of that humiliation, Jesus laid aside capabilities that were rightfully his.

That's what Philippians 2 tells us, though he was in the form of God up there, yet in order to be the servant of God, he was born in the likeness of men.

[21 : 36] Born like us. Therefore, just like men and women, Jesus had to learn many things. He had to learn to walk. He had to learn to talk. He had to learn to eat. He had to learn to dress himself.

He had to learn all of these things. That's why as a 12 year old, he is found listening to teachers and asking them questions. And as a result, Luke tells us that Jesus increased in wisdom.

That's a really, really important thing because it reminds us that Jesus is with you in terms of intellectual understanding. That's why he taught so clearly. And that's why he didn't reserve his message for the intellectual elite.

He didn't just speak to those who were at the pinnacle of knowledge. He spoke to fishing and he spoke to tax collectors and he spoke to very, very ordinary women and he turned them all into theologians because that's the reason for that is because God wants us to know about God is not this kind of cut off, isolated, only for the clever ones kind of subject.

God wants us all to know him and to learn about it. That's why nobody can ever say to God, you don't get it. You don't understand me.

[22 : 53] He understands perfectly because in Jesus, God is with us. And so this idea of with us applies to your location, applies to your experience, applies to your understanding, but it goes beyond all of these things because really the culmination of Jesus coming into this world is the fact that God is with us in terms of a relationship.

And that's why it's really good that Matthew points us back to the Old Testament because he's telling us that there's a history, that God has always had this plan and that plan is based on the fact that God wants to be in a relationship with his people.

He wants to say, I will be your God and you will be my people. And that name, Emmanuel, God with us, is reminding us of the amazing, amazing truth that God is totally committed to us.

We can't work our way back up to God. That's why God has come down to us. And that's the coming of Jesus is the ultimate proof that God is not going to allow anything to come between him and his people because back at the beginning we were created by God, but as I'm sure you know, we sinned and we fell and the relationship that we have with God was broken.

And imagine at that point asking God the question, what are you going to do with these people? His answer, I am going to stick with them.

[24 : 30] And Jesus is God with us because he is committed to a relationship with us. And as part of that relationship, he is willing to represent us.

That's why he's come to be one of us so that he can stand in our place so that he can die in our place. He's come to be our savior, to be our substitute, but he has to be one of us in order to save us.

This is really, really important because a lot of people will often talk about the fact that you have to commit yourself to Christ. You'll often hear that phrase, you must commit to Christ.

Now that's very, very true. And I hope it's true of every one of us here, but you have got to remember that long, long before any of us committed ourselves to Christ.

Christ committed himself to us and he came to be with us. But that commitment comes at a cost because you and I have baggage.

[25 : 45] We are spoiled by our sin, but despite that baggage, despite our failings, despite our mistakes, despite our weaknesses, God has not given up.

And Jesus has come to stand alongside us. He is with us in terms of solidarity. And this is really important to remember because just like Ahaz back in the days of Isaiah, just like he had an enemy conspiring against him, we are the same.

We have an enemy. We have an enemy, the devil, who wants our destruction. And his great desire is to ruin the relationship that we have with God.

And he's constantly, constantly looking for reasons to come between us and God and for our relationship with God to be ruined.

That's how it all fell apart at the very beginning because Adam and Eve were in a perfect relationship with God and the devil came in and ruined that relationship. That was the lie that he told to Eve and it's the lie that he's been telling ever since.

[26 : 49] And so he's, if you like, constantly trying to push God and humanity apart into two sides. So you've got God here and we are here.

And the devil as the accuser is kind of accusing us to God and saying, look at what they're doing wrong. Look at all these failures. Look at what's wrong with them. Look at these people. They need to be abandoned.

They need to be forgotten. And the devil wants humanity to be written off by God as a lost cause. And so there's this idea of two sides being pushed apart. But this is where Bethlehem is an incredible triumph over the devil because look who is on our side now.

No longer is it God here and us here. And the devil starts accusing us. We can say, no, no, no, no, no.

[27 : 53] We have God with us in Jesus Christ. And Jesus has come to stand shoulder to shoulder with you.

Jesus has come to be on your side. Jesus has come to express his solidarity with you.

And in doing that, this is our last point. Jesus has come to intervene on our behalf.

Do you remember the things, the seven things we said at the start? We've gone through them all.

Jesus has come to intervene for us. That's exactly what Matthew 1 verse 21 says.

She will bear a son. You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

[28 : 52] Jesus has come to rescue us from our sin. He is with us in terms of intervention. And again, this is a truth been emphasized in the context of Isaiah.

The people of God had this enemy that seemed so threatening. They were facing a formidable force and they were saying, who's going to help us? And we face exactly the same today as we stand under the threat of the kingdom of evil and of the devil and of sin.

And we say, who's going to help us? Who is going to rescue us from the clutches of sin? Who is going to deliver us from our lost eternity? Who is going to intervene for you?

And the answer is that Jesus Christ is God with us, with us to save us.

And that's exactly why the account of Jesus does not stop at Bethlehem, but this is just the start because he went to the cross and there he died our death and there he destroyed our enemy.

[30 : 04] And that was summed up perfectly in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 14 and 15. This sums up everything that I've been trying to say. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood.

That basically means because you are human. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself, that's Jesus, he himself likewise partook of the same things.

In other words, because you are a human, Jesus became like you. So that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death.

That is the devil and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Jesus is God with us. And that word with is only four letters long, but it is a big, big word.

[31 : 09] Jesus is God. Jesus is God with you. And that is why he is perfect for you.

The perfect saviour. And that's why he is holding his hands out to you today and he is saying, put your trust in me and I will be God with you.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.

Amen. Godugu- parole- gaz■■■