

HOPE CHURCH CAROL SERVICE (PETERSFIELD)

20 December 2015

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS – “WITH”

INTRODUCTION

What's the best thing about Christmas for you?

Presents, meal, family, parties, church...

What do all these have in common?

Being **with other people**, people we love, family and friends

There's nothing worse than being alone at Christmas, it's the time for togetherness.

Why? Why is being **with others** so important at Christmas?

“Being with” is at the heart of the real meaning of Christmas, as we'll see.

In fact, it's at the heart of the nature and character of God himself.

“WITH” IN THE HEART OF GOD

The Bible is full of God being with people, from start to finish, from Genesis to Revelation:

- Genesis – walking with Adam & Eve in the garden of Eden (“Where are you?”)
- Revelation – our final destiny (Rev 21:1-4) *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”*

Multiple places in between:

- *“I am with you”* – to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Solomon, many others...
- *“I will be at home among you and walk with you”* – to Israel (Lev 26:11-12)

Mentioned in the Psalms:

- Ps 23:4 *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for **you are with me**...”*
- Ps 139:7-18 *“Where shall I hide from your presence? ...[various examples]... If I came to the end of places to go, I would still be with you.”*

Frequently repeated phrase *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Deuteronomy 31:6 & 8; Joshua 1:5; 1 Kings 8:57; Hebrews 13:5). Powerfully descriptive words in original languages:

- “leave” = to slacken or loosen grip, to weaken the hold, or to drop
- “forsake” = to desert, abandon, leave behind, relinquish.

God says we're safe in his hands, he won't drop us and walk away.

Why is it so important for God to be with people? It's not as if he needs us, or is incomplete without us, or that he wants affirmation from us, or that we somehow bolster his self-esteem!

Within the trinity, God is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They exist in a permanent community of relationships, each loving the others. But there's so much love and grace and kindness and mercy within the trinity of God that it overflows to his creation – to us! God made people in his image, to be like him, in order to share the loving relationships within the trinity more widely, to bring others in to that love and acceptance and friendship.

That's why he wants to be with us, as he demonstrates throughout human history, recorded in the Bible.

God is not as many people today think him to be (perhaps you think he's like this?):

- remote, distant, uninterested, other, different, separate, unknowable

Instead, he is here, with us, among us, inviting us to be his friends, to share a loving relationship with the God of the universe.

“WITH” AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

Throughout the Bible we see God declaring that he will be with people, from beginning to end. And right in the middle of the Bible we find one event where this all came into particular focus, the pivot point of history, the thing that changed everything for ever.

John 1:1 & 14: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made ... **The Word became flesh** and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

- “Became” = permanent change, real; “flesh” = fully human

God came to be here, to actually be with us physically on earth, and to be with us in nature as one of us.

The coming of Jesus to earth at Christmas is the ultimate expression of God's desire and intention to be with people. He didn't stay in heaven and just say he wanted to be “with us”, he actually came here, where we are!

Jesus was the physical expression of God being with us.

He had a special name to signify this – Matthew 1:18-25 (especially verses 22-23): *“All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).”*

This is quoting something written by Isaiah (7:14) in 720BC. Emmanuel is a name (or possibly a title?) literally constructed from three Hebrew words: Im = with, Anu = us, El = God. Significantly, the emphasis in this name/title is on the first part, WITH. Jesus is the **With-Us-God**.

God is not just with us as an impersonal power or force or invisible spirit. He took it a step further by becoming one of us. The mystery of Christmas is that God was born on earth as a fully-human baby, while remaining the one fully-divine God in heaven.

But Jesus wasn't just with us by being here, he was with us by being human. Philippians 2:5-11: "...*who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*"

By becoming human through his incarnation, Jesus was literally embodying in a physical way God's desire to be with people, being one with us.

And throughout his life on earth, we see Jesus being with people in all circumstances, in good times and bad, happy times and sad, doing ordinary things and really extra-ordinary things. He did this, not because he had to, but because he wanted to.

The arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the life he lived after that, demonstrates the deep desire of God to be with us – with me, with you.

SO WHAT?

So as we come to Christmas again this year, let's not forget the amazing fact that the baby in the manger is actually God with us.

- This is true for you, even if you don't believe it! God is not remote, distant, other, unknowable, uninterested. He knows you, he likes you, he wants to spend Christmas with you – and the rest of the year as well.
- If you'll be spending some or all of your Christmas on your own, remember that you're never actually alone. Jesus came at Christmas to be with us – with you; and to remind you that he will never leave you or forsake you. He chooses to spend his time in your company, and he wants to spend time with you.

They say that you can be alone even in a crowded room. But with Jesus you can never be alone, even in an empty room. Enjoy his presence this Christmas, let the Prince of Peace give you the gift of his peace, receive the joy of heaven and the love of God.

- And if we're planning to be busy this Christmas, being with lots of people, family, friends ... let's also make room to be with Jesus. Let's consciously welcome him, include him and involve him in our celebrations – after all, it's him we're celebrating! In the middle of all the fun and activity, don't forget the point of it all. Don't ignore the person at the centre of Christmas – Jesus, Emmanuel, **God With Us!**

PRAYER