

God with us

Throughout this period of Advent we've been looking at the prophecies of Isaiah, relating to the coming of the Messiah. One of the best known prophecies about Jesus is found in Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

These words which were spoken in the context of a conversation between Isaiah and King Ahaz, were fulfilled 700 years later, when Mary gave birth to her son in a manger in Bethlehem and we find them in Matthew's gospel where he states that Jesus was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

Few Old Testament prophecies have been more debated and discussed than Isaiah 7:14 because this verse tells us, perhaps more than any other, what it is about Jesus that is so special, so unique. It is probably why the truths contained in this verse, and in the gospel of Matthew have for so many years been denied by those who would deny the deity of Jesus. If we believe the words of Isaiah then we have to recognize that Jesus is not just a good teacher, not one of God's prophets (as Islam teaches), and not merely a significant religious leader, as some would have us believe. We have to recognize that he is one of a kind; He stands in a class by himself. Never before and never again will someone like Jesus walk this earth.

So what's so special about him? Why is his birth so significant? Isaiah 7:14 shows us things about Jesus that we need to notice.

First of all, He was born of a virgin. I don't think anyone here can make that claim, that he or she was born of a virgin? Isaiah says 'The virgin will conceive a child!' (Isaiah 10:14 NLT) Anyone who has studied biology in school, will know that it is physiologically impossible for a virgin to give birth. The only way it could conceivably happen is by a miracle from God. Obviously, if God can create the world from nothing, he can create a baby in a virgin's womb. If God designed the laws of the universe; he can bypass them.

But the question is: Why, why did He do it? Why was it necessary for Jesus to be born of a virgin? To show, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus, God's Messiah, was more than just a man, more than just a prophet; that he was God's own son, literally God in the flesh.

Jesus may have began his earthly life in Bethlehem, but that was not the beginning of his existence. The Bible teaches that Jesus existed before the world began. In fact, the things in this passage we need to notice, are some of the things we have been looking at over the last few weeks. The Bible teaches that Jesus is definitely not your average guy in the street. In fact the Bible teaches things about Jesus that the average guy in the street probably doesn't realize.

The first thing is that Jesus has always existed. The second one is that Jesus is God. And following on from that, Jesus created the world.

A favourite lesson at this time of year, usually at the end of most carol services, is the beginning of the gospel of John, "In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him." (John 1:1-3 NLT)

There have been many religious leaders, many founder of religions. But no other major religious figure, neither Buddha, nor Mohammed, nor Confucius, nor anyone else, has ever claimed to have existed eternally; none of them claimed to be God. The pharaohs claimed to be gods, the roman emperors claimed to be gods, but none of them claimed to have created the universe. And none of their followers made any such claim. Yet, both Jesus and his followers made these claims. Jesus said to his followers... "The Father and I are one." (John 10:30 NLT), He also said... "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM!" (John 8:58 NLT)

And the phrase "I am" was a claim to deity; because he was referring to the time when God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:14 NLT)

It is significant that Jesus was born of a virgin because it reveals to us that Jesus is more than just a man. He is the eternal God.

And yet He was fully human. Isaiah says "She will give birth to a son" (Isaiah 10:14 NLT). That speaks of humanity, so that even though Jesus was God, even though he existed before the world began, even though he was the creator of the universe, he left it all to become one of us, and became fully human. Paul writing to the Philippians about Jesus said, "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8 NLT)

Paul is saying that even though Jesus was God in the flesh, he didn't use his deity to his own advantage, he didn't grasp it and cling to it, but instead he surrendered it and became a man.

It is interesting to note that in the early days of Christianity the first heresy (i.e. false teaching) to arise about Jesus was not that he wasn't really God, it was that he wasn't really human. The teaching said that Jesus had been a spirit from God, a phantom without a real human body. Some claimed that when he walked he left no footprints, because he never really existed in the flesh. He just seemed to have existed. And this idea (which was part of a rather elaborate heretical ideology called Gnosticism) was prevalent during the first and second centuries. John's gospels and his letters were written to challenge this philosophy.

This is why he wrote, "Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God." (1John 4:1-2 NLT)

Even today we sometimes struggle with the idea of the humanity of Christ. We sometimes sing Christmas carols with such lines as "The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes," as if he were such a divine baby that he never shed a tear when he was wet or hungry, or maybe He never dirtied a nappy. We sometimes have this image of a Jesus who just floated through the world completely immune to the suffering of humanity; he never felt pain, or sorrow, or frustration, or anger, or temptation. But this isn't the Jesus the Bible tells us about.

In the gospels we see that Jesus felt pain. He felt sorrow. He faced temptation. He even got angry. He became completely human. When he didn't eat, he became hungry. When he was cut, he bled. When his friend died, he wept. He was fully human.

This is significant to us because it means that Jesus completely understands us. He understands how it feels to be tempted. He understands how it feels to be rejected. He understands how it feels to be alone, and to be afraid of the future. He understands the human experience because he became a human. That's what Paul meant when he wrote "This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin." (Hebrews 4:15 NLT) He then goes on to say, "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Hebrews 4:16 NLT)

So this child is special because He was fully God and also fully human and thirdly, He lives among us. Isaiah says "and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us')." (Isaiah 7:14 NLT) There is more to the Christmas story than the miraculous birth of Jesus. The Christmas story teaches us that in Jesus, God is at work in the world in a way in which he never was before. The idea of God being remote God, or distant, is gone forever, as is the idea of God dwelling in a tabernacle or a temple. He now lives among us, he now lives in us, Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Isaiah prophesied "and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us.')(Matthew 1:22) And Jesus confirms that He is the fulfilment in his last words recorded in Matthew gospel where Jesus said to his disciples: "And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt 28:20 NLT)

"God with us", that's who Jesus is. He is with us still, even today, right now, He is here with us. He is with us, every moment of every day of our life. He is when we stumble out of bed in the morning. He is with us as we face the stress of each hectic day. He is with us as we contemplate the uncertainty of the future. He is with us as we sometimes struggle with loneliness and fear. He is with us as we wrestle with temptation. He is our constant companion, our faithful friend who has promised that he will never leave us nor forsake us, and there is no situation we can be in that He is not in there with us in it.

This child who was over born 2000 years ago did not change the world by establishing a new political ideology or a new religious philosophy, or a new way of doing things. This child born over 2000 change the world by changing the way God relates to us, and we relate to God. This child, born in a stable in a world He created, in a universe He created, was God in the flesh. He sacrificed his deity to become one of us, and lived a life of humble obedience, even to the point of dying on the cross for our sins. Three days later he was raised from the dead, and he lives today. When he walked on this earth he was "God with us" and today he is still "God with us." The greatest Christmas promise of all is that Jesus Christ came to live in this world so that he could come to live in your heart. God is with us. Accept, receive, and recognize his presence in your life.

Isaiah 10:14 The virgin will conceive a child!

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