



THE PROMISE OF PRESENCE

90s flashback: who remembers the song *One Of Us* (sung by Joan Osbourne – and Jim Carrey in *Bruce Almighty!*):

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus,
Trying to make His way home?*

The point is that it's alright for God. He doesn't know what it's like to be human – to be one of us. He doesn't know what it's like to be lonely, or afraid, or in pain. But it's also a subtle cry for God *to be* one of us – to be up-close and personal and in this mess with us.

The message of Christmas, however, is that God *does* know, and God *does* care. And we're going to look at a prophecy this morning that says exactly that.

Isaiah 7:1-17

Ok, bit of historical background for you: it's around 750 BC, and the nation of Israel is a divided nation. You've got the Kingdom of Israel in the north, and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. And King Ahaz of Judah is facing a crisis. 2, in fact:

Israel has joined forces with the Kingdom of Aram and they are now threatening to destroy Judah.

Now crises happen to all of us, at some point (in fact for some people that just about sums up Christmas!). And it can seem as though the world is out to get us, or life is, or even God. And that's what Judah is facing here.

So, God sends the prophet Isaiah with a message of encouragement. And it goes like this:

"The virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you shall call him Immanuel (God is with us). And in the time it takes for the child to know right from wrong, the kings you fear will be gone."

So what is this about? Well, the prophecy was originally given to the people listening to Isaiah - so it needed to have an immediate fulfilment, otherwise it wouldn't have been much good to them. So that being the case, who is the virgin or *almah*, the young unmarried woman in this chapter? It's probably a nickname for the people of Judah. And Immanuel? It's probably a nickname for Hezekiah son of Ahaz. And the point of the prophecy is this: by the time this little boy is able to understand right and wrong, Judah's enemies will be gone. But -

Like all OT prophecy, there's a hint of something bigger, something far more important. Because the problem here was more than just some little geo-political conflict in the Middle East 2700 years ago – it's a bigger, spiritual problem: the problem of sin. And that means it's going to need a bigger, spiritual solution. So this prophecy, like all prophecy, points forwards in time to something even greater – the coming of God's Kingdom, when everything gets put right. Which is why Matthew, at the beginning of his gospel, writes this (Matthew 1:18-23).

What is Matthew saying? That the virgin in this prophecy has found her ultimate, literal fulfilment in Mary. And Immanuel finds his ultimate, literal fulfilment in? Jesus of Nazareth.

But so what? What does that mean, for us? It means:

1) God Is Feasible. Not the figment of a deranged imagination, or a statue or a picture created by human hands. God is real, and because God is real, it means we can know that as human beings we have purpose, value, hope. But it also means we have perspective. We need to know that there is something beyond us - because as human beings, we are at our best when we remember that the universe does not revolve around us!

2) God Is Knowable. The symbolic name given to Jesus is *Immanuel*, 'God with us.' God in our midst. I.e. God is not a force so beyond us we can't comprehend Him. God is personal. A God who knows us. Who sees us. Who hears us. And even so, a God who loves us – so much so that He was willing to become a part of the human family. And the deepest need of every human heart, if only we knew it, is to know that love and return it.

3) God Is Touchable. One of the things said about God in the Bible is that He is spirit. But in Jesus, He became as human as you and me. And as vulnerable. The birth of Jesus was not all nice and clean, safe and sanitised, like a picture on a Christmas card – it was as tough as your birth and mine, if

not tougher. And the rest of His life looked that way, too. So when we talk to Jesus we're not talking to a God who doesn't understand. He knows.

4) God Is Breakable. If God could become flesh-and-blood touchable, then that means He could feel pain, coldness, loneliness. Cut Him and He'd bleed. Crucify Him and He'd die. And that's the point. Because Jesus came to tear up the I.O.U.; pay the debt we owe to God; that we owe to Him. And that's what He did for us, on the cross. He allowed Himself to be killed as a way of saying we're forgiven people. As a way of wiping the slate clean.

What If?

So the message of Isaiah's prophecy is: it's not a matter of 'What *if*.' God *will be* one of us. And now, in Jesus, He *is*!

Now this can be hard to get our heads around, so think about it like this: for Harry Potter to know JK Rowling, she would have to do what Stephen King did in his *Dark Tower* series: write herself into the story! And in Jesus, that is exactly what God has done. He's written Himself into the human story. Into all our stories, potentially.

And that has ramifications for all of us, I think. E.g.:

- If you're ever feeling as though life is out to get you and you're facing it alone, you need to know, you're not. God is here, present, active. You may not always understand what He's doing, but you can still trust Him.
- If you're ever thinking, "If people knew the person I really am, they would never love me," understand there is One who does know – absolutely everything – and He still loves, forgives, and wants to help you change.

Jesus promised that He would never leave us, never forsake us – that He would send the Spirit, so that He – God – could continue to dwell with us, and in us. But we have to let Him! As He says in Revelation 3:20:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him, and he with Me."

Because He is still *Immanuel*, God with us.

So will we let Him in?