

Emmanuel

Fr. Mariusz Majewski

Matthew 1:18-23

*Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived together,
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,
yet unwilling to expose her to shame,
decided to divorce her quietly.
Such was his intention when, behold,
the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
"Joseph, son of David,
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit
that this child has been conceived in her.
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins."
All this took place to fulfill
what the Lord had said through the prophet:
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means "God is with us."*

When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, he told him that Mary has conceived a child through the Holy Spirit. *"She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 18:21). Jesus (in Hebrew *Jeshua*) means "God saves". This name seems to be self-explanatory: Jesus is the savior sent by God to save us from our sins. But then Matthew continues:

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child and bear a son and they shall name him E m m a n u e l,' which means 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

Most of the time we do not think about the profound nature of this statement: Jesus is not only our savior, but also Emmanuel, God-with-us. In this essay, I would like to reflect about the meaning of this mysterious name - Emmanuel.

Ahaz and Isaiah

If we want to better understand the meaning of 'Emmanuel', we have to go back to Jerusalem of 734 B.C., when the prophet Isaiah uttered his famous prophecy which, according to the Gospel, has been fulfilled in Jesus. In 734 B.C. the king of Samaria and the king of Damascus came to attack Jerusalem.

King Ahaz, who governed Judah, was terrified because his enemies were very powerful. The prophet Isaiah reminded the king to trust in the Lord, because Jahveh will remain faithful to his promise that he had given David that his dynasty would not be destroyed. Ahaz should not be afraid, Isaiah says, but instead he should put all his faith in the Lord. *"Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm!"* (Isaiah 7:9).

Ask for a Sign!

In this decisive moment Isaiah speaks in the name of God and tells Ahaz to ask God for a sign that would strengthen his faith. But the king refuses to ask for a sign and says that he doesn't want to tempt the Lord. At the first glance we may think that the king is indeed right: we should not tempt the Lord! But here the situation is quite extraordinary: it is the Lord himself who told Ahaz to ask for a sign. It is the Lord himself who came out with this extraordinary proposition!

Ahaz is simply looking for an excuse not to do God's will. He wants to rely on his own strength and political ingenuity in the face of danger, rather than to trust in God's power. Ahaz certainly has faith in one sense: he believes that God exists. Isaiah reminds him that it is not enough, because to have faith means first and foremost to trust in God and his power – this is what Ahaz should be doing. To believe intellectually in the existence of God is not enough; one has to trust him with all his heart.

Almah – Parthenos - Virgin

Despite of the king's refusal to ask for a sign, Isaiah goes on and says that God will give him a sign anyway. Says Isaiah: *"The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14). What is Isaiah talking about here? What mother and what son does he have in mind? He uses the word 'almah' that New American Bible translates 'virgin'. In Hebrew however, 'almah' means a young girl, but not necessarily 'virgin'. It is very interesting that in the Septuagint (a third century B.C. Greek text of the Hebrew Bible), the word 'almah' is translated as 'parthenos', which means 'virgin'.

The translators of the Septuagint recognized the prophecy of Isaiah as a Messianic prophecy. In their view, the future Messiah was supposed to be born of a virgin. Matthew in his Gospel had used that text of the Septuagint and applied it to the virginal birth of Jesus. For the early Christians the prophecy of Isaiah seemed to be very clear: Isaiah was speaking about Jesus, the Messiah, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *parthenos*.

Senses of the Scripture

Whenever we as Christians read God's holy Word, we must be aware of its different senses (layers of meaning). Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of these different senses of Scripture in numbers 115-118. In number 115 we read:

“According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church.”

When we look at the text of Isaiah in light of the teaching of the Catechism, we become aware that most likely for Isaiah the virgin he spoke about was some concrete person – probably a young queen, the wife of king Ahaz. The literal meaning of the text is quite clear: the virgin is a wife of Ahaz and mother of Hezekiah. But this is not the only meaning of the text. The footnote in the New American Bible explains: *“The prophet need not have known the full force latent in his own words; and some Catholic writers have sought a preliminary and partial fulfillment in the conception and birth of the future king, Hezekiah, whose mother, at the time Isaiah spoke, would have been a young, unmarried woman.”* The deeper, spiritual sense of the text is its messianic meaning, pointing out to the birth of the Messiah – Emmanuel.

God with Us

The name Emmanuel (or Immanuel) that Isaiah used has undoubtedly symbolic meaning. The prophet wanted to remind fearful Ahaz that God was with them and that he should not be afraid. He seems to be saying to Ahaz: *“why are you afraid of your enemies? Why don't you trust God? Don't you remember what God had promised? Don't you understand that God-is-with-us, Emmanuel?”*

Isaiah was reminding the King about the covenant that God had established with the chosen people – a special, unbreakable bond of trust and love. This union of God and his people is expressed in many places of the Bible: *“I will be your God and you shall be my people.”* Prophet Ezekiel told the chosen people enslaved in Babylon that God is going to establish with them a new covenant: *“I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will multiply them, and put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling shall be with them; I will be their God and they shall be my people”* (Ezekiel 37:26-27). In the course of its history, Israel would forget often about her covenant with God and God's promises. God has always desired to come closer and closer to his people, to be with them. Eventually he God's Son became incarnate and came in the flesh to dwell among us. When the fullness of time had come, *“the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”* (John 1:14).

God has truly become Emmanuel, God-with-us, in the person of Jesus Christ, our savior and our Lord, who, by taking on human flesh, pitched a tent in the midst of his people. God lived among us as man. But the good news is that God continues to be

with us through the gift of his Spirit that Jesus gave his Church. The prophecy of Isaiah about Emmanuel is thus truly fulfilled in Jesus Christ – he is God-with-us, Emmanuel. This symbolic name opens and closes the Gospel of Matthew. Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus promises his disciples (all of us): *“I AM WITH YOU always, until the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:16). This is the very last sentence of the gospel. Emmanuel opens and closes Matthew’s gospel.

In the course of the celebration of the Mass, the priest greets the congregation with these words: *“The Lord be with you!”* These words express one of the greatest mysteries of our faith: God’s continuous presence among his people. We have become so accustomed to these words that many times we fail to understand their significance. But these words proclaim the same truth that is contained in the name Emmanuel – God is with us!

God is with us: in our joys and in our sorrows, in good times and bad times, in sickness and health – no matter what we go through. By revealing himself to us as Emmanuel, God invited us to open our hearts to him, so that he can be truly alive in our hearts. We have to let him do it. And if we do, he promises us that at the end of time we will participate fully in that great mystery, when the new Jerusalem will be created. *“Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be-with-them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away”* (Revelation 21:2-5).

Let God be with you!