

518 Emmanuel, God with us

In Matthew 1.23 we read, “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (KJV).

Those words are first found in Isaiah 7.14, when, in 742 BC, Ahaz, king of Judah, was threatened with invasion by Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel (Isaiah 7.1). Having sent words of reassurance to Ahaz via Isaiah (7.2-7), the Lord then gave him the following sign: an “almah” shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (from v.14). Before this lad was but a few years old, Rezin and Pekah would be removed, (and this removal duly happened as promised). Now that Hebrew word “almah” (Strong’s number 5959), means “damsel, maid or virgin”, its emphasis thus being on a young, unmarried woman whose virginity is implied but not specified. The far more common Old Testament word translated as “virgin”, “bethuwlah” (Strong’s number 1330), means just that, a “virgin”, but is not the word used in the sign to Ahaz.

Now we know that the Lord’s prophecies often have multi-fulfilments, and that is clearly the case with this intriguing text in Isaiah 7.14, which turns out to have three fulfilments - so far! Its first fulfilment involved Ahaz’ new young queen, Abijah (II Chronicles 29.1), no doubt a virgin on her wedding day, duly conceiving a son via Ahaz in the normal way, the son being given two names – Hezekiah, and Immanuel, “God with us”. Hezekiah turned out to be, unlike his father Ahaz, a fine king of Judah (eg., II Chronicles 28.19,22 - 29.2), and thus serves as a “type” of Jesus Himself, who came later as the “antitype” and the ultimate “Emmanuel, God with us”.

But Hezekiah, under his second name Immanuel, is far more than a good king and a “type” pointing forward to Jesus, which brings us to the second fulfilment of the Isaiah 7 prophecy. The wonder is that in this Hezekiah-Immanuel figure, God really had come to His people in a new and special way, in what is termed a “mystical” sense, that is, wholly real, but unseen. In his book “World in Liquidation” the Bible Chronologer Arthur Ware, mentioned occasionally in these Reflections, shows how this divine indwelling of His people can be seen as a pre-incarnate presence of Jesus Himself, Emmanuel. The centuries between the Immanuel of Isaiah 7.14 and the Emmanuel of Matthew 1.23 are thus in a sense a period of God-with-us “gestation” within the “womb”, first, of Hezekiah’s God-fearing life, and second, after his death, within

the hearts of the faithful believing remnant of Judah. Down the generations these faithful ones accepted God's presence already mystically in their midst (eg., Isaiah 8.10b), while patiently waiting for the day of His visible presence in their midst in Christ Jesus. Members of this faithful remnant include Hezekiah himself; Zacharias and Elisabeth; Mary and Joseph; Simeon and Anna, plus many others known only to the Lord.

Then we come to the third and most obvious fulfilment of the Isaiah 7 prophecy. We see that in Matthew 1.23, the use of the word "virgin" when quoting Isaiah 7.14 is wholly justified once we understand the context of the Hebrew word "almah". But when it comes in Matthew 1 to Mary's virginity and the use of the Greek word "parthenos", "virgin", (Strong's number 3933), the Holy Spirit through Matthew clearly emphasises that Mary remained in her virginal state until after the birth of her firstborn son (Matthew 1.25a). We have no reason to doubt that Hezekiah was conceived of a virgin by King Ahaz, and that of course Jesus was conceived of a virgin by the Holy Ghost (Matthew 1.18b,20b,25a, KJV). How we are blessed with the praises of Mary herself, and then of old Zacharias, when each realised the enormity, and the utter blessedness, of what the Lord God was now granting to His people (Luke 1.46-55 and 67-79). The faithful remnant had remained faithful over the years – and so had the Lord Himself.

And so for us, we thank the Lord afresh for His triple-fulfilment "Immanuel promise" to Ahaz: fulfilled first in the young boy Hezekiah and the defeat of those two kings; secondly and mystically in King Hezekiah and the faithful believing remnant of Judah; and then thirdly, visibly and most wonderfully, in the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.

We see that that second, "mystical", fulfilment still applies for all those "in Christ" today. For the Lord's faithful believing remnant today - people like us – similarly believe in "Emmanuel, God with us", in His real but unseen "mystical" presence in our midst right now (egs., Matthew 28.20b / John 14.16-17 / I Corinthians 6.19 / II Corinthians 6.16). What is more, we too faithfully and eagerly await the Lord Jesus' visible coming for His own, in what will be a fourth prophetic fulfilment of Isaiah 7.14!

As we now heartily sing once more, "Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King!", we can share in Luke 2.20; and then in John 20.20b; and then soon in I Thessalonians 4.16-18. Yes indeed, let us "comfort one another with these words".

