



Advent 2016: The O Antiphons

Emmanuel shall come to thee

James Crampsey SJ

The rousing chorus of the well known Advent hymn invites us to 'Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!' Where does this promise come from? James Crampsey SJ leads us from our reflections on the O Antiphons towards the fulfilment of the covenantal relationship that they express.

When we hear 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'¹ we are transported into a world of positive expectation. It would be fair to say that the Advent readings have not been particularly consoling. But now this is different, there is a promise here, a sound and sign in our ears that something is going to happen. We all want to embrace that hope, that future, that warmth which takes shape in that glorious word Immanuel – 'God is with us'.



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The word Immanuel appears three times in the Bible.² In its first appearance, in Isaiah 7:14, King Ahaz is in a quandary. God has offered him a sign, an offer which the king refuses. Think how often people cry out for a sign, now here is Ahaz telling God he does not want one.

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. (Isaiah 7:10-12)

Why Ahaz refuses a sign is not clear, but God tells him he is going to get a sign anyway. And we hear the words familiar to us from the Gospel of Matthew:

Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.' (Isaiah 7:13-15)

There is a pattern of giving children names which mean something, which are a sign. Isaiah already has a first child, *Shear Yashub* ('a remnant will return' – 7:3). Another child of an unnamed prophetess and Isaiah is in the offing, as we hear in the following chapter. He carries the onerous and ominous name, *Maher-shalhash-baz* ('hasten to seize booty, hurry to gather spoil' – 8:1-3). Some think that Immanuel is the second of three children of

Isaiah, but it seems more likely that Immanuel is the son of Ahaz and a young woman. And the difference from the other two boys is that, in the Hebrew text, it is the young woman that names the baby. Why this name, Immanuel? Why 'God is with us'?

This 'God being with' is part of the fundamental covenantal relationship that is articulated in the [Jacob narrative](#). Jacob has to flee from the anger of his brother, Esau, whom he has cheated seriously in two ways, his birthright and the blessing of Isaac. Jacob seems to have escaped his brother's vengeance by the skin of his teeth. At his first stop at Bethel, he dreams a dream. He sees (Israel can be heard both as the man who sees God and the man who contends with God) the ladder which is the bridge between heaven and earth. This is not a one-off. This bridging is the way things are and we can hear it in God's word to the dreamer: God's promise to Jacob is, 'I am with you' (Genesis 28:15). Walter Brueggemann challenges us to take in the full significance of this disclosure:

The introduction of this formula dare not be treated like a cliché. It is the amazing new disclosure of Jacob's God, one who is willing to cast his lot with this man, to stand with him in places of threat.³

Is there also something to be learned from the book of Ruth? That great translator, Robert Alter, introduces his translation of the book with three and a half richly explanatory pages. Ruth's is a story in which all the characters are good. It starts with a superb opening speech which unveils the quality of Ruth herself, a speech which we often take into song in Advent. 'Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I shall live, your people will be my people, your God will be my God too.' This is covenantal language and behaviour of the highest order: *I will be with you in the way that God is with you*. This is also God's word taking flesh, and not in one of the chosen people, but in a woman from Moab, the most ancient and hated enemy of Israel. The tribes of Moab and Ammon are the result of Lot's incest with his daughters. It is barely conceivable that a woman of Moab should live in such a God-like fashion.⁴

It seems wonderfully appropriate that [Ruth](#) appears as one of the women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. In her own fruitfulness, she guarantees the Davidic line in which stands Ahaz's little Immanuel, as well as Jesus himself. I think that it can fairly be said of the little Immanuel of the Isaiah 7 prophecy that, in him, 'I am with you' is the word that takes flesh. If 'I am with you' is God's own speech, we put those words into the third person and say 'God is with us' – Immanuel.

God's continuing presence takes definitive shape in the child born of Mary. This long awaited promise is complemented at the very [end of Matthew's gospel](#) by another promise of continuing presence: 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (28:20)

Every year in Advent we prepare to enter into that continuum of the Immanuel: 'God is with us' and 'I will be with you'. In our senses, we are catching an underlying tune, the words of God to Moses at the burning bush: 'I am who I am, I will be who I will be' (Exodus 3:14). God's breathtaking promise of faithfulness, seen in little Immanuel by his mother, seen in Ruth as she commits to Naomi, seen in the first-born of Mary and in the Risen Lord, calls each one of us into our own faithful relationship with the God of the covenant. Each one of us [gives birth to Jesus](#) each year, allowing God to take shape in us again and anew in such a way that the sign, 'God is with us', can be seen again, can be spoken again.

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¹ Emmanuel or Immanuel? Immanuel reflects the Hebrew, while Emmanuel reflects the Greek and Latin versions. Immanuel is often the version of the name in modern English language translations, but by no means all of them, and will be used henceforth in this article.

² In Isaiah 7:14, the quotation of that verse in Matthew 1:23, and in Isaiah 8:8.

³ W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (John Knox Press, 2010), p. 245.

⁴ R Alter, *Strong as death is love* (Norton, 2015), p. 57. Alter accepts the view that the book is a challenge to Ezra and Nehemiah's policy of forbidding intermarriage with foreign women.