



## Love in the present tense

Teresa White FCJ

Teresa White FCJ suggests that vocabulary that we tend to associate with Christmas might be a helpful addition to our Pentecost language – after all, who is the Holy Spirit if not ‘God with us’?

When Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph found the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem, sitting among the elders and scholars, ‘listening to them, and asking them questions’ (Luke 2:46), it is likely that Jesus, following his Bar Mitzvah, was taking part in a Midrash session.<sup>1</sup> As we know from his parables, Jesus was clearly familiar with this practice of deepening and expanding the meaning of a scriptural passage in response to contemporary questions. It is in Midrashic mode that, as the feast of Pentecost approaches, I find myself drawn to look more closely at the word [‘Emmanuel’](#), applying it not to Jesus, but to the Holy Spirit.

When I started secondary school at the age of eleven, two new languages came into my life. In each of them, the first verb we had to learn by heart was ‘to love’ in the present tense: ‘*amo, amas, amat...*’ (Latin) and ‘*j’aime, tu aimes, il/elle aime...*’ (French).

Karl Rahner defines grace as ‘the self-communication of God in love’. Reflecting on this, it struck me that ‘love in the present tense’ is a perfect way to describe the gift, or grace, of the Holy Spirit. Love communicates before being understood: it is the language of the human soul, speaking without words, silent in the face of elusive mystery. And if we wanted to



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capture the essence of the Spirit’s presence in a single word, then Emmanuel ([‘God with us’](#)) would be a good choice. Indeed, if it is true, as Philip Endean SJ once wrote, that ‘... the only God who actually exists is God-with-us’,<sup>2</sup> then Emmanuel could be considered the ‘family name’ as it were of the three persons of the Trinity: God beyond us, God among us,

God within us. These thoughts led me to wonder whether that name, Emmanuel, which many Christians tend to associate almost exclusively with Christmas, should not also hold a pivotal place in our Pentecost vocabulary. Through the indwelling of the Spirit, God is always with us, never absent from our lives, and the Hebrew word *Emmanuel* verbalises the eternal presence of the divine in the whole of creation.

In the days following the resurrection, the gospels tell us that Jesus returned to his disciples in bodily form. Until the ascension, he was there day after day, opening their minds and hearts, helping them to understand what the Scriptures had said of him. During that time, ‘he flooded them with his nearness, his presence, his intimacy ... They needed to learn by experience what his new presence felt like, how to recognize it, what it meant for them.’<sup>3</sup> Finally, before he left them, he said to them: ‘Know that

I am with you, always; yes, to the end of time' (Matt. 28:20). And since it is through the Spirit that Jesus remains with us, the Spirit, too, can rightfully be called Emmanuel.

There are many beautiful hymns, ancient and modern, in honour of the Holy Spirit. One of my favourites is 'Gentle as Silence',<sup>4</sup> which dates from the 1970s and continues to be sung in churches in this country – we sang it in our parish only last Sunday. I find this unpretentious song – no lofty theological language, no complicated melodic structure – illuminates the idea of the Spirit as Emmanuel, 'God with us'. The music is quietly contemplative, and the three short verses (which do not name the Spirit explicitly) speak of the divine presence in our lives in moments of unignorable silence. We experience that presence through love and beauty, and through awareness of God's nearness and mercy. Gently, tenderly, the Spirit opens our eyes to the beauty of creation, accompanies us on the journey of life and leads us back to God when we lose our way.

The presence of the Spirit, one with God in essence, is real and undeniable, but not actually visible, audible or tangible. We sense that presence in moments of deep grief and intense joy, as too in moments of questioning and bewilderment. God's love for us is unconditional, but we do not have to accept it. So the Spirit comes to us as a guest, and in many of our Pentecost hymns and prayers the word 'visit' is used to indicate this. If we invite the Spirit into our lives, we receive the [seven gifts](#) when they are needed, and they give us the confidence to walk in love along the road of life. The Spirit's role is to comfort and enliven, to challenge and disturb; our part is to listen and respond, to allow the breath of the Spirit to transform us.

On the feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit into our everyday lives, helping us in our weakness, calling us on to good, revealing to us the daily miracles of creation. With the light and guidance of the Spirit, we can look to the future with hope, not knowing precisely how things will turn out, but believing that God is with us in all that happens in our topsy-turvy world.

Of all the fruits of the Spirit, gentleness – the eighth on Paul's list in Galatians 5:22 – is perhaps the most delicate, quietly leading us into the proximity of God. The Spirit of gentleness calls us to step off the treadmill of stress and distraction, greed and urgency, and to look at our lives with a contemplative gaze. It is then that we become aware that life is full of moments of grace. The gentle presence of the Holy Spirit, Emmanuel, reminds us that 'God is with us' at the heart of the world and everything in it.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Midrash': the traditional Jewish method of interpreting and elaborating scriptural texts, orally and in writing, through dialogue and discussion. For Christians, the near-equivalent of Midrash is exegesis, which aims to reach a deeper understanding of a biblical word or passage. Midrash, more creative and wide-ranging, seems more appropriate here.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Endean SJ, 'Karl Rahner and the Heart of Christ', *The Month* 30 (1997) – quoted in *The Way* 63, no. 2 (April 2024), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Resurrection* (Marymount Institute Press, Second Edition), pp. 36, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Words and music by Estelle White (1925 – 2011): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQyEHQhnBI0>.