

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign;  
Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts...

The last time I stood in this place I reminded all of us that Matthew's Gospel ends with the promise of Emmanuel, God with us. "This God is with us to the end of the ages" is part of the Great Commission. It is not simply an add-on. Wherever you go, wherever you are, know that God is with you. God is with US, capital U and capital S through the ups and downs of this life, through the changes and chances of this world. I need to say this again because it is crucial. God is with you. God is with us. "You can't have one without the other."

As God travelled with his ancient people the Hebrews by a pillar by night and by a cloud by day, sure signs of his presence with them in their wanderings in the wilderness, so he is with us now in the wilderness and temptations of our today, in the wilderness and testings of the pandemic.

On the Feast of Christ the King we reminded ourselves of God with us, Immanuel. Four Sundays later we have come full circle and are reminded of its beginnings, the stirring of life in a mother's womb, as we recall the Annunciation, which we mark annually on 24 March. The Virgin Mary in the fullness of her pregnant body four days out from Christmas witnesses to the journey God undertakes in creation to come alongside us, to journey with us, to reconcile us and to be with us in a new way.

Words of T. S. Elliot come to mind as I think of the small and yet momentous beginning captured in the telling of the Annunciation and the journey we are on. Words which I always mistakenly attribute to the *Journey of the Magi*, but actually belong to the poem *Little Gidding*.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Let me say something briefly about Little Gidding. It is a place in England where Nicholas Ferrar in the 17th century established a Christian community as a deacon. The community was made up of individuals living together based on a rule of life inspired by Anglican practice as captured in the Book of Common Prayer. Why is this remarkable? It is remarkable because after the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII communities that lived the Christian life purposefully in this way were a thing of the past. The only unit available after the Reformation after the closing of monasteries and the disbanding of religious orders was the parish, the local church.

In the poem *Little Gidding* T. S. Elliott underlines the We and The Us of our faith.

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I was born in a harbour city and my first crossing of the Atlantic by freight ship was in 1956. A favourite pastime even today when I now return to Hamburg is to watch the boats and ships coming into harbour to dock, unload and then to disembark again for countries near and far. From the earliest days of human existence people the world over have been trading goods with one another. Throughout history there has also been an exchange of knowledge. There have been exchanges large and small, ranging from commodities and ideas to customs and recipes! Each exchange is part of our exploration helping us to know the place for the first time.

Today as we recall the Annunciation we begin that exploration of our faith that begins anew at Christmas. Now the Virgin is heavy with child. Maybe she is bending her hips. Maybe she is holding her sides. Maybe she is walking in that distinctive way pregnant women do. Maybe she feels him stirring. Maybe Joseph is listening for a heartbeat. Maybe she is guiding his hand gently to where the child is kicking... Something is stirring can you not perceive it?

We are four nights out from keeping the Christchild's birth, a Saviour's birth. Just about now in real time Mary heavy with child and Joseph of the House of David (a man of Davidic lineage) would be leaving Nazareth for Bethlehem. Mary heavy with child, who will know labour pains and will give birth in her heaviness four days out from Christmas witnesses to the truth that is ours to tell. God with her as a child in the womb.

God with us in human form. True God and true Man. Sharing this life, which is not free from sin and sorrow, but which knows joy, moments of contentment. A world in which there is so much goodness, despite the yets and the buts... We think of those who have lost children. We consider those who have had miscarriage. We think of the refugees living in camps across the world and esp. within the EU in Calais and in Lesbos. We think of the Nigerian schoolchildren kidnapped the other week, some who have yet to be found or returned. And we wonder with our Nigerian brothers and sisters and we wonder with our African brothers and sisters why there is no outcry!

In that exploration of which T. S. Elliott recalls we will share our experiences. We shall share our faith. We shall share our knowledge. We shall engage in an exchange of ideas. We shall disagree. We may even disagree vehemently. We shall pray together. We shall worship together. We will ask for God's forgiveness together. We will seek righteousness together on behalf of the stranger far away and close at hand. We need each other. Let us always have regard for another. Let us always stand with another. Let us know God with us Immanuel.

For me Christianity is always invitation. And there is no better place to start than calling to mind the words of the angel to a terrified and perplexed Mary, "Do not be afraid!" Do not be afraid to explore this faith that speaks of a saviour's birth. A faith in which heaven comes to earth so that earth might be lifted into heaven. God for us.

"Do not be afraid!" These angelic words remind me of what someone said in our enquirers' group about their perception of the Christian faith as an outsider that becoming a Christian is a narrowing of life. This is what it looks to someone from the outside. My experience is the opposite and it is affirmed by others that this is not the case. In the past I have summed it up by saying that being invited into the Christian faith through a life lived in community has given me a life much richer and more varied than the trajectory I was on.

Let me end with the truth of some words spoken by Jesus that I have come to know to be true for me and for others. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." This is the paradox in which Christians live. It comes with an invitation: Do not be afraid! Let the journey begin anew that coming full circle to arrive where we started, "And know the place for the first time."