

# EMMANUEL - GOD WITH US

By Peter Lonsdale



It seems every Christmas provides opportunity to reflect on what matters most! Sadly for many, Christmas is a time of estrangement and separation from family. For me this season brings reminders of the teachings of Jesus and the invitation to understand the central witness of his message and mission.

One of my favourite New Testament parables is the Prodigal Son. The son has spent his inheritance and finds himself at his lowest point eating from the pig's trough. A wonderful moment follows. Suddenly he 'came to himself!' He wakes up, realizes what he has lost and what matters most to him. He decides to return to his father, seek his forgiveness and offer himself as a slave. The parable records he is welcomed home by a loving and forgiving father who celebrates the return of his lost son. The Prodigal Son realized what mattered most and was prepared to do whatever it took to recover the relationship with his father.

There must have been so many times of frustration for Jesus when he wished his disciples would wake up and 'come to themselves'. Despite his life pointing to his mission of building the Kingdom of God, his disciples still wondered about when they would take up arms and overthrow their Roman oppressors, or denied him, or argued about who of them would be greatest in the new Kingdom.

The Kingdom Jesus spoke of was not to be defined by geographical borders, race or creed. Rather, it would be found in the hearts and minds of people whose lives were touched by an awakening to the profound love of God. This love would change them and impact their relationships. It would be as if they were born again! This reconciling ministry of Christ is timeless; it is a spiritual quest for the souls of humankind that seeks to connect us to each other and God. Its message is as important and powerful today as ever.

In our family my wife Jill and I share the preparations for Christmas, although she carries by far the bulk of them! My primary job is to write the cards and prepare an annual update of our family to share with friends and family. I confess at times I have seen as a chore. In my best moments however, my spirit is lifted as I reflect on the people I'm writing to and the special experiences we have shared together. There are so many precious and sacred memories! It reminds me of how connected we are to each other despite our physical separation. Many of these people have remained lifelong friends and we share a special connection whenever we are together again.

Jesus spoke about his special connection with God in very personal ways; 'the father is in me, and I am in the Father'. 'If you have seen me you have seen the

Father.' He yearned for that same connection with his disciples and all people. Jesus told his disciples the Kingdom was within them and amongst them. When the spirit of Christ is with us we become as one. There is no estrangement or separation. Where there is love, acceptance, forgiveness and grace, then God is truly with us. The kingdom Jesus spoke of does not wait for a vengeful army but is to be found here and now in the quality of relationships with our partners, families, friends and even enemies.

'And so this is Christmas, and what have we done ...' to quote John Lennon. Have we woken up to the essential meaning of this season and the invitation of Jesus? When I look back over my life I am reminded how the gift of grace from others who have sought to demonstrate the gospel has shaped my awareness of God. Although their witness has been flawed at times, like my own, their witness of love founded in Jesus Christ has nurtured and claimed me. It has enabled me to see God at work, invested in me and all those around me

This world continues to be a place of joy and sorrow, of conflict and peace, of famine and plenty. Into such a world of contrasts the Christ child is born again: 'Peace of earth, good will to all men'. Emmanuel, God is with us! May this be our witness as we remember what matters most.