

## Sermon by Rev David Thiem

9am – Wesley Service – Advent 4 – 21<sup>st</sup> December 2014

Theme: 'Emmanuel, God with us'

### Introduction

In many ways this past week has been horrendous with the hostage taking in Martin Place, with the needless deaths that ensued from that. Then in Pakistan the unimaginable killing of so many school children by the Taliban. The week ended tragically with the eight children killed in Cairns. In this season of supposed goodwill and peace on earth to all people, we are a little unnerved by the occurrences in the world around us. Locally, across the road DFAT was closed down on Wednesday with a 'suspicious parcel' that fortunately turned out to be nothing sinister.

Hence it was quite lovely to experience the other side to all this within our faith community. On Monday we had our final Whippersnappers Playgroup for the year and to see 35-40 children with their mums, some dads and a sprinkling of grandparents enjoying each other's company was great. Also the fact that there are particularly young mums from a variety of embassies present is a delight. One of the young Russian women gave some Babushka dolls as gifts. Also to have 25-30 people involved in the Blue Christmas Service on Tuesday evening was a meaningful time and by the emails I have received, this service met a real need. Not a large group, but by far the largest since I've been at Wesley!

In the Canberra Times, the Relax editor, Karen Hardy, quoted a school church sermon that touched her. Not often in a secular paper, in a section given over to food, restaurants, gardening and wine do you get a Christian reflection that is quite wonderful.

I would like to share a portion of Karen's recollections of what she heard. She says of herself, having been raised a Catholic, she is a good C & E these days (Christmas and Easter) with a preference to Christmas. Anyhow, this is her take on what the associate school chaplain, Andrew Robinson said.

### The most important word is 'with'.

Why is Christmas such a struggle? The rhetoric around Christmas is great: generosity, peace on earth, togetherness, yet so much of the time we just want to get it over with. It's a set of hoops to be jumped through, a whole lot of sticky tape and tinsel and flat batteries and cracked iPod screens and complaints. But the funny thing is: Christmas has no shortage of good intentions. Does anyone ever think: I want to make Christmas as stressful as possible, maximising the disappointments and exacerbating family tensions?

No: Christmas is hard because we want it to be good. To be meaningful. To be a place and time of connection with others. So what's going on?

In one of his Christmas sermons, Dr Sam Wells, then Chaplain to Duke University, suggests that we need to remember 'the most important Christmas

word – *with*'. He reckons that part of the problem is that all the stuff we're doing *for* people at Christmas can get in the way of actually being *with* one another, and worse can totally distract us from reconnecting *with* God who is revealed to us at Christmas in this surprising way.

If Christmas is going to be a place of true connection, with each other and with God, it needs to be a time of '*with*' rather than just '*for*'. It is surprisingly easy in life to be so focussed on doing things '*for*' that we never actually get to be '*with*'. You can do '*for*' without a relationship, without communication. But it may not leave you with much. And the truth is, being '*with*' is often a lot harder. This is such a tragedy because the Christmas story is the story of God wanting to be '*with*' us. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us," as the first chapter of John's Gospel says. At Christmas God comes to us in the most disarming, unbelievable way: as a child, born in scandalous circumstances in a back shed in a small town in a far-flung province of the Roman Empire.

The heart of Christmas is a baby, the baby called "Immanuel – God-with-us". God comes to be '*with*' us, and he calls us to be '*with*' one another, together, as his children. Of course '*with*' doesn't eclipse '*for*'. Jesus doesn't stay a baby: he grows up, he teaches, he heals, he comforts, he calls for justice for the oppressed, and at the climax of the story he dies '*for*' us and defeats death '*for*' us.

These are things we need God to do for us.

But the point of all that, the point of all that Jesus came to do and suffer was so that we could be '*with*' God and each other. All of our doing for others, in whatever way, needs to remember what it's all about. In the end, being '*with*' one another, together as God's children in God's good world is part of our Christian faith.

My hope for all of us is that this Christmas might be one where we are reminded of God's bizarre but beautiful desire to be '*with*' us, and for the chance that gives us to truly be '*with*' one another. So remember the '*with*' of Christmas and may that positively impinge on your life. Amen