O Come Emmanuel (Advent 4)

I should have said at the outset of this series of reflecting upon just 4 of our Advent antiphons, that the Coventry Diocesan 'tiny poems' (written by a **Suffolk** Parish priest's wife) are accompanied by wonderful photopgraphs. Today's, 'Are we nearly there yet?' is of a little child looking out of a rainy train carriage. I used to drive my Dad mad when I asked that famous question on our summer holiday journeys, usually to the Isle of Wight. Did he say, 'Another 6 hours to go'? I can't remember! My frustration and excitement got all muddled up together.

Well we **are** nearly there - when we leave Advent behind to celebrate Christ's coming at the First Mass of Christmas Midnight on Thursday! Some of you will be sleeping, some of you will be in another part of the country, and some of you might even be saying that no-one told us it starts at 11pm, but that would be a heresy!

It is good to know that Isaiah and Ahaz also had their problems with communication. Isaiah confronts the King who is terrified at the prospect of war. Isaiah's words both challenge and encourage. The king must stand firm and trust in God. Ahaz however is not listening. His faith rests not on God, but on a plan of his own. Isaiah insists again: he must hear the word of the Lord and seek a sign, the reassurance that God is with him. Ahaz replies with smooth and pious words; he will not put the Lord to the test. This though (says the Dean of Westminster in our Advent book) is breathtaking

hypocrisy. The truth is that Ahaz does not want the Lord to come anywhere near. He prefers his own version of events.

This hypocrisy triggers a promise and a rebuke from the prophet. The Lord will send a child, a new king, and this child will be the very thing Ahaz cannot face – Immanuel, 'God with us'. More than that the child will never be a hypocrite – he will always choose the good.

As John's Gospel explains again tonight, Christ comes to the world to testify to truth and summon us into truth. That is a wonderful door for us as we sit restlessly in the maternity corridors across the world, waiting for news, waiting for a new arrival.

This drama is not lost on the writer of today's Gospel with news of a son to be born to Mary and Joseph.

Joseph, in the midst of anxiety and even shame, is told that in this challenging moment God is suddenly 'with us'. It is shocking. It is barely credible.

The 20th century Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe famously preached about the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. You may recall the detailed genealogy to show us that Jesus is born into a long family history. McCabe noted just how human the story is: 'Jesus did not belong to the nice clean world, he said, 'He belonged to a family of murderers, cheats and cowards.'

Perhaps this would not go down well at our Midnight Mass but it really is what we mean when we speak of Emmanuel,

‘God with us’: ‘He belonged to us, and came to help us – no wonder he came to a bad end and gave us some hope.’

When we sing our wonderful carols tonight and when the choir show off their new- found grasp of Swedish (thanks to James’ inspiring and animated teaching), we just need to remember this:

We are waiting for a Saviour who really touches our ordinary, everyday lives in the hope that they will be transformed by His love and tender care; and through his coming again will inspire the greater good: in our choices, decisions, and relations each with the other.

We **are** nearly there when we can say across the globe, and pray with all the created order:

‘Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span;
Summer in winter; day in night;
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav’n to earth!’

Let us reach the rafters later when we can sing out in unison: ‘O Come, O Come, **our Emmanuel’**.

AMEN.