

This week, as I do every year at this time, I travelled into the Focus Ireland café on Eustace Street, on the edge of Temple Bar to hand over the gifts you gave to Focus Ireland. I always find this a very humbling experience. There is the gratitude of the staff for our modest offering. Then there are the stories of those they meet in the café and out on the streets. As the chef told me, those on the streets are coming from a wider and wider group in society. He told me of a young man, 12 months ago with a job, a company car, his own flat – suddenly destitute. Pride prevented him from seeking help until after several weeks on the street he came to Focus Ireland. Now he has received job training and is back in a flat.

That place a symbol of hope and care ever more necessary in our straightened times. For me it is also a very hopeful sign that fundamental values of care and compassion that marked Irish society were not swamped by the Celtic Tiger. That place is also a sign of God's presence in our society. Those who work there may or may not have a specifically Christian commitment but they are definitely channels of God's love and care.

One of the names given to the infant to be born in Bethlehem, that we read in our lesson from Isaiah is 'Emmanuel', God with us. Matthew's Gospel begins with the designation of Jesus as Emmanuel. The closing words of the Gospel are a promise of continuing presence, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Jesus had promised his disciples, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.' Jesus here in the midst of us as we gather to worship him; among us as we share bread and wine, proclaiming his death until he comes again as together we confess:

Christ has died,

Christ has risen,

Christ will come again.

God with us. Paul meditated upon the enormity of that in those lovely words to the Philippians:

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:6-8*

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews explores this further as he reflects on Jesus as our great High Priest:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. *Hebrews 4:14-16*

God with us, God in Jesus, entering into our human condition and in the loneliness of his temptations, of his agony in Gethsemene, of his suffering on the Cross he experiences our humanity. What it is to be lonely and destitute, what it is to be abandoned beyond the city wall.

The writer to the Hebrews goes further:

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, *Heb 5:7-9*

This is the wonder of Christmas. God with us, not in the tinsel and glitter of a world obsessed by celebrity but in the birth of a child, a child who was to touch the leper,

welcome tax collector and sinner and those whom the world despised. Over this season of Christmas we will hear again those lovely words of St John:

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

^{Jn 1:14} And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. *John 1:10-14*

May we be enabled to see his glory, to receive him into our hearts and to enter into our inheritance as sons and daughters of the living God.