

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	21 December 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Fourth Sunday of Advent
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

The novels of the twentieth century American writer Ursula Le Guin tell the story of a young boy named Ged who goes to wizard school. If that sounds familiar, I am sure that J.K. Rowling must have used these books as the inspiration for Harry Potter. One of the things that Ged is taught at an early stage in his training is the importance of finding and knowing the true names of things. 'Magic consists in this,' Le Guin writes, 'the true naming of a thing'.

That stress on the importance of names is similar to what we find in the Bible, in which a name is not just something incidental, but it expresses the true reality of the person who bears it. It's interesting that if we read the Bible, there are a large number of names for God the Father, Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit.

In today's gospel reading, we are given two names for Christ which I would like us to think about. The first is the most familiar: Jesus. The angel says,

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.

This name 'Jesus' or Jeshua means literally Yahweh saves or 'the Lord saves'. Jesus's name contains within it the name of the Lord (Ya), and he is called Jesus because, fittingly, 'he is the one who is to save his people from their sins'.

In a way, the angel's words right at the very beginning of the story predict what it was that would make Jesus a bit of a disappointment to many Jews in the first century. At various stages the readings we hear over Advent and Christmas reflect the political situation of first century Israel under occupation by the Roman Empire. And, because of this, there was a strong expectation that the messiah, when he came, would be the one who would deliver his people from

Roman domination, so that the people of Israel could be great once again, as they had been a thousand years before under the reign of the great King David.

But this kind of political liberation was not what Jesus brought. He did not bring, at least not in any direct way, the freedom and restoration of national pride that many were longing for. Instead, he brought something that was much more profound, and much more belonging to the God whose son he was: not liberation from the Romans, but he is the one who is to save his people from their sins. He would not bring any superficial solutions, but point his people towards the source of our human problems: our sin. And, in the words of one writer on the subject, 'if you are not healed there, then however many good things you may find, you are not truly healed.'

And then, slightly confusingly, our gospel reading immediately leads us in a somewhat different direction with another name. Or perhaps it is not so much an actual name as a description of who he is, as Matthew tells us that these events fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel.

This name, Emmanuel, takes us on a different track. It means 'God-is-with-us', and it seems to me to express so much about who it is that we as Christians understand about the God whom we encounter in Jesus Christ.

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Greek philosophers had an understanding of who God was. The philosopher Plato saw God as the original idea of the Good: from which all things that are good are derived and copied. For Plato's pupil Aristotle, God was the Prime Mover: one who does not move himself, but who causes all the movement and activity there are in the universe. Similarly, a few hundred years after Jesus was born, Muhammad would preach that God is great, all-powerful and entirely to be revered and obeyed.

Jews and Christians would say not that any of these things are essentially wrong but what I think we would say is that these other conceptions of God that we find in ancient philosophy or in Islam fail to express a crucial dimension of the way we understand God, which is expressed in the beautiful name 'Emmanuel': God-is-with-us. It is that dimension of closeness, of compassion, of empathy, of love which lies at the centre of the Bible.

So if you read the Jewish Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – God is with us; God is close to his people: God is their guide and shepherd, whose law

is in their hearts, and whose praise is on their lips; who surrounds them at all times with his love and mercy, so that they can truly say 'the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold'.

And for Christians, in the birth of Jesus this is made even more concrete and more real: for in Jesus, who is given the title 'Emmanuel', God is with us in an even closer way. For, at the first Christmas, he comes to be with his people incarnationally: born as one of us to share our life, to share our flesh and blood; to be with us as one of us.

And, as an extension of this same movement into the here and now, this same Jesus comes to be with us sacramentally whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. Because he is with us in bodily form under the sacramental signs of bread and wine, until he comes to be with us once again at the end of time.

Christ has been given, writes St Paul, the name that is above every other name: his various names and titles remind us that we can never get to the end of our discovery of who he is. His name is Jesus is the one whose name tells us that he will save his people from their sins; he is the Christ: the Messiah or anointed one; and he is Emmanuel: God-is-with-us in closeness and love.

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.