

WON'T YOU LET HIM INTO YOUR CELEBRATION?

G.K. Chesterton, a noted British poet and theologian, was a brilliant man who could think deep thoughts and express them well. However, he was also extremely absent-minded, and over the years he became rather notorious for getting lost. He would just absolutely forget where he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to be doing. On one such occasion, he sent a telegram to his wife which said: "Honey, seems I'm lost again. Presently, I am at Market Harborough. Where ought I be?" As only a spouse could say it, she telegraphed back a one-word reply: "HOME!"

This is precisely what this classic passage in the first chapter of Matthew does for us. It brings us home. Home to the real meaning of Christmas. Home to the most magnificent truth in the entire Bible. Home to our Lord's greatest promise. Home to the reason we celebrate Christmas. Namely this- GOD IS WITH US!

When we accept Christ into our lives, nothing, not even death, can separate us from God and His love. God is with us, that's what Christmas is all about. "God is with us" the great people of faith have always claimed that promise. Just think of it: Moses, caught between the Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea in a seemingly hopeless situation, believed that God was with him and he went forward and trusted God to open a way and he did!

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went into the fiery furnace, into a seemingly hopeless situation, and they trusted God to be with them and He was! Little David stood before Goliath. What chance could a small boy with a slingshot have against this giant of a warrior? But David believed that God was with him and it made all the difference!

Now it's interesting to note that when the writer of Matthew's gospel wanted to capture the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of the Christ event, then meaning of Jesus in a single word, he did a very wise thing. He reached back into the Old Testament, pulled out an old word, dusted it off, and used it to convey the message. The word was Emmanuel. That's what Jesus is about, "His name shall be called Emmanuel" which means, "God is with us." The impact of that Christmas promise is incredible. When you believe that, when you accept that, when you claim that promise, it will absolutely change your life. Let me show you what I mean by bringing this closer to home.

- I. "GOD IS WITH US." WE CAN CLAIM THAT PROMISE FIRST OF ALL, WHEN WE ARE FRIGHTENED.

All of us get frightened or scared sometime. Jesus sensed this and consequently he talked about this a lot. The words fear, anxious, troubled, fretful, afraid were often in His speech, "Fear not, Fret no more, Don't be anxious. Let not your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid. He spoke words like this often because he saw lots of fears and anxieties in the lives of those he loved.

Phyllis Martin, a schoolteacher in Columbus, Ohio, tells of the day when the storm clouds and strong gusts of wind came up suddenly over her school the public ass system blared tornado warnings. It was too dangerous to send the children home. Instead, they were taken to the basement where the children lined the walls and huddled together in fear. She said the teachers were worried, too. To help ease the tension, the principal suggested a sing-along. But the voices were weak and unenthusiastic. One child after another began to cry. The children could not be consoled and were close to panic. Then one of the teachers, whose faith seemed equal to any emergency, whispered to the child closest to her, "Kathy, I know you are scared. I am too, but aren't we forgetting something? There is a power greater than any storm. God will protect us. Just say to yourself, God is with us, then pass the words on to the child next to you, and tell her to pass it on." Suddenly that dark and cold basement became a sacred place as each child in turn whispered around the room those powerful words, "God is with us," "God is with us," "God is with us." A sense of peace and courage and confidence settled over the group.

Phyllis Martin said, "I could hear the wind outside still blowing with such strength that it literally shook the building, but it didn't seem to matter. Inside the fears subsided and tears faded away. When the all clear signal came some time later, students and staff returned to the classrooms without the usual jostling and talking. Through the years I have remembered those calming words. In times of stress and trouble, I have been able again and again to find release from fear or tension by repeating those calming words: God is with us! God is with us! God is with us!" when we are frightened, we can claim that great Christmas promise.

SECOND, WE CAN CLAIM THAT PROMISE WHEN WE ARE LONELY.

There are lots of lonely people in the world who need desperately to hear the good news of Christmas. Her name was Margaret Waage. It was Christmas Eve. After getting off her job at noon, she stood dejectedly in the crowds waiting for the subway. Margaret had worked by herself all morning, since all her fellow workers had been given the day off. Many people around her were talking happily about their trips home to their families. Some had little children with them. It all made her feel so sad. She had no home, just a rented room, no plans, no husband, and no children. And in that moment Margaret had never felt lonelier.

But then suddenly she heard the crystal notes of two flutes interweaving. Down the platform were two young girls playing Christmas carols. In their serene young beauty, they looked like angels in disguise. Margaret added her quarter to the pile of change in their open flute cases. The train came and went, but she lingered, fascinated by the people who came forward to drop coins, even bills, into the flute cases. Most were shabbily dressed, but their faces seemed alight with happiness. These were the poor- the people Christ had greatly loved. On that cold, noisy subway platform they were joined, without knowing one another, in the great Christmas feast of love that Margaret had lost sight of in her own self-pity. Finally she heard the girls play "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and she found herself remembering the words: "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today."

And suddenly there in that bleak subway station, everything changed! Margaret described it like this: "Of course I had a Christmas feast to go to! The Lord's Supper at church that very evening. Of course I had a home and family. Our Lord said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Of course I had a child! The Holy Child could be born in me every day as I sought to love him above and beyond anything else. "She took the next train feeling warm and contented. She knew that those two young strangers with their flutes had given her a magnificent Christmas gift. They had put Christ back where he belonged- in her Christmas, in her life, and in her heart. When we are frightened and when we are lonely, we can claim the Christmas promise of God's presence with us.

THIRD, AND FINALLY, WE CAN CLAIM THAT PROMISE WHEN WE ARE IN SORROW.

It seems like it would be easy to feel the presence of God when we are on top of the world and the breaks are going our way, but actually the reverse is true. God is never nearer to us than when we are hurting. There are two reasons for that. First, I think we are more open to God when we are in need; and second, I believe God is like a loving parent who wants especially to be with His children when they are in pain.

An 85 year old woman with a large family had a crippling stroke. As a result, she was unable to speak, unable to walk, and unable to care for her basic needs. Reluctantly, her children placed her in the care of a nursing home. She was there for 5 years, mostly content. They had no indication that she even knew them when they came for visits. One Christmas season the family was gathered for their family Christmas celebration. They decided to keep the tradition of their childhood and gather around the piano to sing carols.

After they had sung a couple of Christmas carols, one of the daughters suddenly said, "Let's go get Mom." Two family members drove to the nursing home and brought Mom back to the house. Swiftly they wheeled her to the piano and they began singing carols again. When they came to Silent Night, they couldn't believe what happened. Their mother, who had not spoken a word in 5 years, started singing Silent Night along with them. It was amazing. Her voice was soft, but she was on key and she knew all the words. Everybody was stunned, but they kept on singing. They smiled at her and she nodded. They sang other carols and she sang them all. It was a moment of incredible warmth and joy, blessing and almost magical beauty. Even when she couldn't recognize the faces of her own children, even when she seemed incapable of laughter or tears, the songs of Christmas faith were still alive deep within her spirit, well below the frost line of illness and loss. Deep within her soul, the songs of Christmas faith were alive and well, and somehow miraculously she was able, as the Christmas carol puts it, to "Repeat the sounding joy."

I think I know why. I think it's because each one of us has deep down in our souls-an incredible hunger to come home to the good news of Christmas. An incredible hunger to come to the manger, an incredible hunger to feel and celebrate the redeeming, forgiving, sustaining love of God. An incredible hunger to be in the presence of God. And that is why Christmas is so special. Because it reminds us that God is indeed with us.

In every circumstance of life, even when we are frightened or lonely or in sorrow, that's the good news of our Christian faith. God is with us.