

The very first words that start off the Bible, in the book of Genesis, are the words *'in the beginning...'* Those words begin to tell the amazing story of the creation of the whole world. And the very first words which John writes in his gospel book are the same as those that start the whole Bible – *'in the beginning...'*

'In the beginning...', at the time of creation, God started something amazing. Out of nothing God created a world which was beautiful and vibrant and colourful and full of life and love.

'In the beginning...' God created the heavens and the earth, the day and the night, the sky and the seas and the land, the plants and the trees, the sun and the moon and the stars, the fish and the birds and the animals, and then last of all God made human beings, in God's own image. And God saw that what God had made was good.

'In the beginning...' tells of a time when all was well, all was perfect and true and good. But things began to go wrong in this perfect world that God had made. The human beings were tempted, and they sinned. They got things wrong and they turned away from God, and when they did that evil and darkness and pain entered the world and suddenly things were no longer as they were supposed to be.

And in the years that followed the world went on in much the same way. Some people recognised God and followed God and loved God; but others ignored God and did as they pleased and lived as though God didn't exist. And there was sin and evil and pain in the world which made God so sad as he looked down at his beautiful world and knew that all was not as it could be, as it should be. And yet God loved his children so much that he didn't want to punish them. And so what happened was this – God sent Jesus, his Son, to come down to earth.

And John starts his account of this event with the words, *'in the beginning...'* just as the account of the original creation began. John says that *'in the beginning...'* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word that John is talking about here is Jesus. Just like in Genesis, when John talks about *'in the beginning...'* he is talking about the creation of the world, and he's telling us that Jesus was there with God the Father at the very start of our world.

And yet when John says, *'in the beginning...'* he's also talking about Jesus, coming down to earth as a baby, sent from God the Father. This was a **new 'beginning'**. This was a new start for the world - a time to put things right.

Jesus came to earth as a human being, to live as one of us, so that he could understand what life was like for us on earth. As John tells us, **"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."** He was a man and yet he was also God. And because of that he could fully know what human beings experience on earth, but could also do something about it.

That's the Christmas message, right there. Jesus came to earth, to be born as a human being, to live amongst us. Or, as The Message version of the final verse of our gospel reading puts it, **"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood."**

And the Hebrew word for that is 'Emmanuel'. It's a fantastic word, meaning 'God with us'. **If we stripped this whole season back to just one word, removing all the glitter, the nostalgia, the hype and the stress we would simply say, 'Emmanuel.'** That's the whole of Christmas and its meaning in one word.

The concept of 'Emmanuel' is actually quite a mind-blowing thing when we stop to think about what it really means, isn't it? And it's a unique idea to our Christian faith. In other religions, God is far away from his people, separate, other, removed. Other gods would never consider stooping so low as to become involved in the mess and the mayhem of the world.

But our God is different. He chooses involvement. He chooses incarnation – literally 'becoming flesh'. He chooses to come and join us in our mess, because we can't seem to get ourselves out of it without help – help which only God can give. So the fact that God came down to earth to be with us in the person of Jesus changes everything forever.

Let's look for a moment at those 3 words which give the meaning of the term 'Emmanuel'. God With Us. The first word is **God**. It's important that we remember that this baby born in a stable, whose birthday we celebrate today? IS GOD. The Father didn't send down a very holy angel to come and rescue us. He didn't choose a very well behaved human being. He didn't just try to find the best example of someone living a good life. He came himself. Jesus, God's Son, left his home in heaven, left the rights and the benefits and the privileges and limited himself, taking on a human body – a helpless, newborn body at that. So the almighty, powerful God, the creator of the universe, became a person and experienced hunger and thirst and grief and sorrow and sadness and laughter and joy and fright and pain and excitement and temptation and needing the loo – just like we do. God.

The second word is **With**. God didn't decide to come and live in a nice, quiet, respectable part of the world, in a suitably grand palace, with lots of servants and staff. He came to a middle of nowhere town in a time in history when there was no mass communication around the world. He was born into a family consisting of a teenage girl and a man who almost divorced her before an angel told him not to. He was born into poverty, and not long afterwards he became a refugee, fleeing from King Herod. He came to live WITH us, genuinely choosing to experience all that human life is about. Because of that, we know that he really understands and cares about all that we go through in our lives. With.

And the third word is **Us**. God didn't come down to earth in order to save Jewish people, or even in order to save Christian people! He didn't come to save only people in Israel in 33AD, or people in America in 2018. He didn't come for rich, clever, beautiful people. He didn't come for 'good' or 'nice' people. He didn't come for people who never do anything wrong. He came for US – you and me, and them. For every single person on this planet. Us.

This fantastic story of the life of Jesus is truly the greatest story ever told, better than any Hollywood blockbuster. And it begins over 2000 years ago, with a baby born to a teenage mother and a bemused father, who had travelled miles across the desert to fill in a census form ordered by the government, only to find all the hotels full, and the only place to sleep a smelly space shared with animals and visited by shepherds and kings.

Each Christmas we have chance to pause for a moment amidst the hustle and bustle of our celebrations. We have a chance to be still, to be quiet, and to reflect again on this story which is true, the greatest story ever told, the story of a new '*beginning*', the amazing news which John tells us about, that "**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**" Amen.