

# God with us

Heather Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 7:10-16

The birth of Christ is near. God will soon be with us.

Ahaz is unwilling to trust God. Isaiah has suggested he asks for a sign but he will not do so. But God will provide a sign even so. "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." It was supposed to be a sign of Ahaz's true calling as king, in the line of David. Signs were an important way of God communicating with the people, right up to Gospel times – "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger," the angels tell the shepherds (Luke 2:12).

For us, of course, Immanuel, "God with us", is Christ. As we approach Christmas Day, we think again of the beginning of God's journey here on earth in human form and of all it means for us. The miracle of God as a tiny helpless baby leads on to the even greater mystery of his willingness to die a humiliating death and then of his glorious resurrection.

Perhaps we haven't always recognised that his birth is a sign for us that we can hold onto when we doubt or find life difficult. It is a sign that God is with us and has plans for our own lives and for all humankind. ☺



God, who has promised to be with us, as we reach the end of Advent help us to look forward not only to the birth of the Christ child, but also to the fulfilment of your kingdom as we look for his coming again. Amen.

## Advent is a season of penitence *Part 4 – almsgiving*

by Caroline Hodgson

In the Christian tradition, almsgiving is, at a profound level, as much for the benefit of the giver as the beneficiary. This is clear from Matthew's Gospel (6:1), where Jesus warns against showy displays of generosity: "Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them". Elsewhere he is clear that the motive behind our generosity

matters, and it must be love: "So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you" (Luke 11:41).

Sometimes the extended hand that contains a gift, is also outstretched in order to keep us at arm's length from the recipient. Sometimes a gift can be an empty obligation. So in all our giving this season – charitable or otherwise – let us think and pray about why and how we give, and ensure that we are giving in a spirit of true generosity and love. ☺

**“ God is coming! God is coming! All the element we swim in, this existence, Echoes ahead the advent. God is coming! Can't you feel it?”**

Walter Wangerin Jr (1944-2021), American author and educator

## Books of the Old Testament

### *Ezra*

by Trevor Dennis

Ezra takes up where 2 Chronicles leaves off, and tells the story of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple after the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians had destroyed everything, but their empire fell to the Persians, who allowed the exiles to return home and practise their own religion.

Nearly sixty years after the new Temple is finished, the Persian king tasks a Jewish scribe, Ezra, with establishing Jewish Law. Ezra travels from Babylon to Jerusalem, where he is shocked to learn that some of

the men have become "polluted" by marrying wives from the surrounding peoples; women with foreign cultures and religions, whom he describes as "abominations". These men are ordered to divorce their wives and send them away with their children, so the people can escape the wrath of God. He sees the people of God as a holy remnant, who must keep themselves pure.

Nothing is mentioned of the plight of the women and children who were ostracised. How inclusive should the Church be? This remains a question we must address. But surely we need not fear the wrath of God. ☺