

Mary from Nigeria Sermon on Christmas Eve 2006

Sisters and brothers,
in those days a decree went out...
from the government of Angela Merkel, the new chancellor in the Federal Republic of Germany. All the refugees & asylum seekers in the country had to be distributed among the regions of the whole republic according to their nationalities.

This happened when Frank Walter Steinmeier was the minister of foreign affairs, and Beckstein of Munich was in charge of home security in Bavaria.

So Mary set off from Düsseldorf in the North to the city of Munich in the South. There was no Joseph to go with her. There was just a letter of transfer that forced her to go immediately. Mary was alone, and Mary was expecting a child.

While she was still on the journey, she felt the first labour pains. She just hoped she would make it to the place she was supposed to go to. She prayed that she would meet people who could be at her side and support her, when it came to “the worst”.

Mary had more than enough to do carrying herself & the child inside her. No way could she manage a bag or a suitcase. All she had were the clothes on her back.

After three days in a dirty, overcrowded asylum seekers’ home, it was time for her to deliver the child.

In a hospital she’d never seen before, she gave birth to her firstborn son...
“She wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them...”

And she called him Emmanuel, God with us.

Believe it or not: this is a true story.

And it is only one out of a whole bunch of stories that happened just like this or in a very similar way.

Mary is of course not called Mary...

Her names are as manifold as the Nigerian women seeking asylum in our rich country.

But Emmanuel is real.

Emmanuel is Emmanuel – God with us.

And his name comes true: God is with us in every child.

God is with us in every single child born to a mother who has nowhere to go and no place to stay.

All these little boys and girls born under “biblical” circumstances in the central maternity clinic of this city are living signs that God is with us, Emmanuel.

And then God in these tiny babies, some of them premature...

God weighing less than 2.5 kilos...

God is not even given a birth certificate, or a passport, or essential food and clothing.

“God with us” needs at least a mother & a father, each with a birth certificate and a passport, otherwise his existence is not recognised by the authorities. And to achieve that, the Marys in the Germany of the 21st century have a long way to go...

Fortunately there were people living in that region doing everyday tasks in their fields. People not spoilt or poisoned by bureaucracy and suspicion, but people led by their true faith in a living God – living in these children for example – and in his kingdom come true.

These people were nurses, midwives, pastors, doctors, taxi drivers, professors, journalists, managers, engineers, housewives, teachers, mothers, fathers, church members, friends...

They’d met an angel who’d told them not to be afraid, but to set off on a journey for the sake of what they believed.

“The Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord,” they were told, “has been born”. And the sign for them would be: a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger...

A child wrapped in a woollen blanket lying in her mother’s arms, while a trustworthy stranger takes them in his car from the hospital back to the asylum hostel...

A child, in baby clothes far too big, gently cared for by the nurse in the intensive care unit, and then lovingly and carefully placed back in the incubator...

A child without official identity for weeks... without insurance or social support...

A child desperately needing to see a doctor – where the church pays the bill...

A child that needs a family, where the church welcomes and provides...

A child – Emmanuel – God with us.

We’ve had so many small “God with us” babies at Peace Church in these past weeks & months, that sometimes some of us have felt really worried, exhausted, breathless – and blessed.

Whenever we have looked these children in the eye, we have seen God. Looked God in the eye, and known that what we were doing was right.

Emmanuel would not have survived, had there not been the doctor writing letters; the pastor confronting the authorities with her understanding of justice and humanity; showing perseverance in convincing administration officers that mothers and children are not just numbers on a list, but lively human beings needing care.

Emmanuel would not have survived, had there not been the doctor who offered treatment at half price, the pharmacist who donated medicine and more, those who gave their time to visit, to provide food, to collect baby’s clothes, prams, blankets, beds...

Emmanuel would not have survived, had there not been real shepherds and kings with precious gifts... with donations of time and money that helped the church to help the others, that helped the church to keep its doors and arms wide open to the Marys and their children.

Christmas at Peace Church started in September, when the first four pregnant asylum seekers walked into Sunday worship & asked for support.
Ever since some of us have been as busy as can be.
But never mind: we've helped God come to earth in every smile of a mother and every giggle of a healthy and happy baby.

This Christmas there is not one single star hanging in my house, not one cookie that has been baked in my oven. The precious mincemeat from England has luckily got a 'best before' date of 2008, so it can sit and wait in my larder ... but I feel closer to Christmas this year than I have ever done.

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger...”

My wish for us all this Christmas is: that we may be open and able to see the signs of Christmas: the child in the stable, the mothers in need, the teenagers, the parents, the family, the friends, the church, the society, the political system... all in need of us – to make a difference.

My wish is that once we've found our “child in the manger”, we can follow our call to make known what we've learned about this, praising God with what we do, and proclaiming his peace with who we are, thus helping God to be born right among us...

Emmanuel – God with us – tiny, vulnerable and fragile...
a handful of God longing for our love...
tonight and every night.
Merry Christmas.

Let me close my address tonight with a short poem...

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angel is stilled
when the star in the sky is gone
when the kings and princes are home
when the shepherds are back with their flocks
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost
to heal the broken
to feed the hungry
to release the prisoner
to rebuild the nations
to bring peace among the people
to make music in the heart.

Amen.