

Sermon for St. Columba at Botany, Auckland, New Zealand

Date: June 21

Preacher: Rev. Pek Muan Cuang

General Secretary, Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM)

Former Principal, Tahan Theological College (TTC)

**“IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US THROUGH FRIENDSHIP, FAITH, AND
HARDSHIP”**

Biblical Text

Matthew **1:23**

“They shall call him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

Supporting Texts:

- Psalm 46:1
- 2 Corinthians 4:8–9
- Hebrews 13:16

Greeting and Words of Gratitude

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, members and friends of St Columba at Botany, it is a great joy and privilege for me to worship with you today and to stand before you in this pulpit.

I bring warm Christian greetings from the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

My name is Rev. Pek Muan Cuang, and I currently serve as the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. I also had the privilege of serving as the Principal of Tahan Theological College during the years when many friends from PCANZ and St Columba visited us.

Today, I come not as a stranger, but as family.

For more than two decades, St Columba and the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand have faithfully walked alongside the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. Through your prayers, generosity, visits, and friendship, you have become a source of strength and encouragement to us.

We remember with joy the visits of youth groups and church members from New Zealand. Those were precious times of fellowship and friendship that we still cherish.

We are especially grateful for your faithful support to **Tahan Theological College (TTC)**. Because of your partnership, TTC has continued to grow and prepare leaders for ministry across Myanmar. Let me take this opportunity to share some updates about TTC.

TTC currently offers both Full-Time Academic Programs and a Distance Lay Theological Education Program. Our full-time programs include L.Th., B.Th., M.Div., M.Min., B.A. (Liberal Arts), and M.Th. programs with specializations in New Testament, Old Testament, Mission, and Pastoral Studies.

The new academic year began in June, and we are delighted to report that enrollment in our full-time programs has exceeded 150 students. Considering the ongoing crisis and many challenges facing our country, we are deeply grateful to God for providing such a large number of students who are eager to prepare themselves for Christian ministry and service.

At the same time, this growth has brought a significant challenge. Our existing classroom facilities are no longer sufficient to accommodate the increasing number of students and programs. As a result, we are in urgent need of additional classroom space, which is why we recently shared our prayer request regarding the classroom expansion project.

We are also greatly encouraged by the response to our Distance Lay Theological Education Program. The demand for theological training among church members continues to grow, and this year the total enrollment in the program has surpassed 700 students. We praise God for this remarkable opportunity to equip believers across different regions, especially those who are unable to attend residential programs.

Despite many difficulties, we continue to witness God's faithfulness through the growth of theological education and leadership development. We are truly thankful for His abundant provision and guidance.

We are also deeply thankful for your care and concern for **Agape Hospital**. PCANZ has been one of our main supporters in helping the hospital continue its ministry. By God's grace, Agape Hospital is growing and continues to serve many people with healing, care, and hope, especially during difficult times. Please allow me to share briefly about the ministry of Agape Hospital and how busy it has been in serving the people over the past year.

During the last year, Agape Hospital provided care for nearly **30,000 outpatients**, admitted **15,056 inpatients**, and performed **1,034 surgical operations**. Despite its relatively modest size, Agape Hospital remains one of the busiest hospitals in our region, serving not only our local community but also many people from surrounding areas.

We thank God for the opportunity to serve so many people through this important healing ministry. At the same time, the increasing demand for healthcare services has highlighted the need for larger and more suitable facilities.

Therefore, the church has begun a long-term project to relocate the hospital to a larger site owned by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. The relocation project has already commenced and is progressing gradually. While much work remains to be done, we continue to pray and trust that God will guide the process and provide the resources needed for its successful completion.

We would greatly appreciate your prayers for this important ministry and for the future development of Agape Hospital as it seeks to serve even more people with quality healthcare and Christian compassion.

Before I preach today, let me simply say from the depths of my heart:

Thank you.

Thank you for praying for us.

Thank you for standing with us.

Thank you for walking alongside us in both joyful and difficult times.

You have shown us what true Christian partnership looks like.

Immanuel — God With Us

Today, I do not come with a complicated theological message.

I simply want to share with you how God has been with us during difficult times.

Our theme today is:

“Immanuel — God With Us.”

Matthew 1:23 says:

“They shall call him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

These are beautiful words.

But what does it really mean that God is with us?

Does it mean life will always be easy?

Does it mean Christians will never suffer?

No.

The Bible never promises a life without suffering.

But it does promise this:

In suffering, God does not leave us.

In uncertainty, God walks with us.

In darkness, God remains present.

This truth has become deeply real to us in Myanmar.

Faith Through Hardship

In recent years, Myanmar has experienced many challenges.

Our country continues to face instability and uncertainty. At the same time, many communities have suffered repeated manmade disaster and natural disasters — bombing, burning houses, arrests, killings, earthquakes, cyclones, floods, and displacement.

Although this is not good news, please allow me to share some of our grief and challenges.

As a result of the ongoing crisis, more than 600 houses belonging to PCM members have been burned down or destroyed. Nearly ten villages and towns where our church members once lived and served have been completely abandoned.

The human cost has been even more heartbreaking. More than 40 people have lost their lives, and many others have been injured because of the conflict and instability. Countless families have been displaced and continue to face uncertainty about their future.

For many families, daily life has become increasingly difficult.

Churches have also been deeply affected.

Some communities have become smaller because of displacement and migration. Many young people have left in search of safety and hope for the future. Some ministries have had to relocate to safer places.

At present, three PCM church halls in Tahan are serving as temporary shelters for people seeking safety since the beginning of last week. More than 300 displaced persons are currently being hosted by PCM members. They have come to our town because fighting is expected to occur in their respective areas. Unfortunately, this situation arises from time to time due to the ongoing instability in the region. We continue to support one another and pray for peace and safety for all affected communities.

As church leaders, we often listen to stories of fear, uncertainty, and suffering.

Sometimes we ask:

“Lord, where are You?”

Yet again and again, we discover something beautiful:

God has not abandoned us.

Psalm 46:1 says:

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

This verse has become very real to us.

Many times, we did not know what tomorrow would bring.

Yet somehow, God sustained us.

Churches continued.

Worship continued.

Theological education continued.

Ministry continued.

Hope remained alive.

If God had not been with us, I truly believe we would not still be standing today.

But because God is with us — **Immanuel** — we are still here.

Still praying.

Still worshipping.

Still serving.

Still hoping.

Doing Good Even in Difficult Times

Even amidst hardship, PCM has chosen one biblical theme to guide us:

Hebrews 13:16

“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Even though we ourselves face challenges, we continue encouraging one another:

**to care,
to help,
and to share with one another.**

Because hardship does not cancel God's calling.

Even in difficult times, God still calls us to love and serve others.

And through caring for one another, we continue to experience God's presence.

Perhaps this too is one way we experience **Immanuel — God with us.**

God With Us Through Friendship

But today, I want to say something very important.

We have experienced God's presence not only spiritually.

We have experienced God's presence through faithful friends.

Through churches like **St Columba** and **PCANZ**.

Dear brothers and sisters, during difficult years, you did not forget us.

You prayed for us.

You encouraged us.

You stood in solidarity with us.

You shared our burdens.

In many ways, you became part of God's comforting presence to us.

Romans **12:15** says:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”

You have lived out this scripture with us.

This is true Christian friendship.

And for this, we remain deeply grateful.

God With You Too

Dear brothers and sisters,

Before I close, may I say this gently:

Perhaps some of you may think:

“Myanmar’s suffering is very different from our lives here in New Zealand.”

Yes, our situations may be different.

But the truth of **Immanuel — God with us — belongs to all of us.**

Because suffering wears different faces.

Some struggles are visible.

Some struggles are hidden.

Some may be carrying worries about health.

Some may be grieving the loss of a loved one.

Some may feel lonely, discouraged, or uncertain about the future.

Some young people may quietly wonder:

“What will my future look like?”

Some families may carry burdens that others cannot see.

Sometimes life may look peaceful on the outside, yet our hearts still carry worries, disappointments, or fears.

But the good news of the Gospel is this:

God does not only come to people in times of war or disaster.

God comes to all of us.

In our worries.

In our weakness.

In our disappointments.

In our waiting.

This is the promise of Immanuel:

You are never alone.

Sometimes God calms the storm.

Sometimes God strengthens us to walk through the storm.

But He never abandons His people.

And perhaps today, God is reminding all of us again:

“I am with you.”

Conclusion: Holding Onto Hope

The Apostle Paul says in:

2 Corinthians 4:8–9

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned.”

Yes, we face hardships.

But we are not abandoned.

Why?

Because **God is with us.**

Immanuel.

And one of the ways we have experienced God's presence is through faithful friends like you.

So let us continue walking together.

Let us continue praying for one another.

Let us continue doing good and sharing what we have.

And let us continue trusting in the God who never leaves His people.

Before I close, let me say once again:

Thank you, St Columba.

Thank you, PCANZ.

Thank you for loving us.

Thank you for standing with **Tahan Theological College.**

Thank you for supporting **Agape Hospital.**

Thank you for walking alongside the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Your friendship has become part of our story.

And may we continue to live in the hope of this beautiful promise:

"They shall call him Immanuel" —

"God with us."

Amen.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God,

We thank You that You are Immanuel, the God who is always with us.

Thank You for Your faithfulness through every season of life.

Thank You for sustaining Your people in times of suffering, uncertainty, and fear.

Today we especially thank You for the faithful friendship and partnership between St Columba, PCANZ, and the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Lord, continue to bless this church and its ministry.

Bless its leaders, families, young people, and mission.

Strengthen them to continue being witnesses of Your love and grace.

We pray for Myanmar and all who are suffering from conflict, displacement, fear, and hardship.

Bring peace to our land.

Protect the vulnerable.

Encourage the discouraged.

Strengthen the churches.

Give hope to our young people.

Help us not to lose heart, but to continue doing good and sharing with one another.

And remind us always that we never walk alone, because You are with us.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.