I imagine that in Australia right now, there are more than a few people asking, *'If God is real, then why didn't He stop the two gunmen from shooting all those people in Bondi last Sunday evening?'* Or, using the title given to Jesus in our readings, if God was indeed ***with-us***, then this ***surely*** wouldn't have happened.

The simple response is that if that's how God works in the world – making a person ***do*** *this, or* ***not do*** that – then we'd be God's puppets and not free to choose God's will for ourselves and for other people: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Unfortunately, God is usually one of the first ones to be blamed – Jesus himself was a Scapegoat – but in the past week, we've also seen migrants and Muslims blamed… insinuating that if they ***weren't*** with us, then this ***would've*** have happened. We've also seen the government blamed: if the Government was doing its job – ie. If the Government was with us – then this wouldn't have happened.

Here's what actually matters. In Bondi, innocent people were targeted by terrorists consumed by hate. And in those same moments, God was ***with*** and working ***through*** ordinary people from different faiths and backgrounds, who, out of ***love***, ***kindness***, ***goodness*** and ***self-control***, ran towards danger to protect others. Ahmed El Ahmed, a Muslim, originally from Syria, was one of them. God was most definitely ***with us*** on that dark day.

Matthew's description, "the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream," gives us an idea about ***how God-is-with-us.*** In the Bible,

an ***Angel*** is more of a ***function*** than a noun. The word ***angel*** means messenger, and is an entity through whom God speaks, reveals God-self, and offers consolation in difficult times.

In my homily at Masses last Sunday, I shared a joyful story about a woman I'd visited earlier this year in the palliative care ward. I shared how, through the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick on her death bed, she'd had a tangible experience of Jesus ***becoming real*** for the ***first time*** in her life. Following the 7.30am Mass, a parishioner came up to me and shared a dream she'd had, in which a completely different recently deceased parishioner came to her in a dream, proclaiming that "Jesus is real!" This is her testimony!

"Over the last 12 months, I have been trying to get closer to God. I often feel like a bit of a fraud when it comes to my faith. I really want to believe; however, at times I find myself being a 'Doubting Thomas,' always looking for signs or proof that God—and the promise of eternal life—are real. This year, I joined a Bible study group to try to grow in faith. At the beginning, I felt overwhelmed and extremely inadequate, wondering how other people seemed to trust so completely in what we were reading. I even remember thinking they might be a bit gullible. I nearly gave it up, but I decided to stick with it. I also spoke to a priest about my lack of faith, and I began praying for 'an outpouring of God's grace.'

Recently, a dear friend from our parish—someone I truly loved—died after a courageous battle with cancer. I felt a deep connection with her, yet I never shared with her my struggles with faith. I saw her for the last time after she had lost consciousness in palliative care. That night she died and I had a dream in which there were two versions of her—one sick version and one as her healthy self. In the

dream, her healthy self said to me, “I’m okay … and it’s real … Jesus is real!” I shared this with my sister, who is full of faith, and she was overwhelmed, but I still had my doubts.

Last Sunday, I went to the 7:30am Mass, and some words from the Gospel really caught my attention. ‘The dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor: happy is the person who does not lose faith in me.’ Also standing out to me was Jesus saying, ‘Look, I am going to send my messenger before you: he will prepare your way before you.’

After the Gospel, Fr Josh began his homily and shared a story about a woman he had visited in Dove Cottage, whom, after anointing her with holy oil, had her own experience of Jesus’ realness. On her death bed, she told him that she could now let her children know, ‘It’s all real … Jesus is real.’ I had goosebumps and was astounded at what I was hearing. Was God talking to me? I think so. I have goosebumps even now, just writing about it.”

Friends, God ***is*** with us because God became human, died on the cross, and is risen from the dead. It is Jesus who makes himself tangle, not just in the Eucharist, but to those who search for him in curiosity and openness of heart. Through the power of His Holy Spirit, God reveals God’s own self in ways we can recognise. And so, as we approach the celebration of Christmas, may our hearts be open to gift moments of grace through the messages of angels in dreams and visions, throughs and feelings. And may we rejoice that even in the darkest moments of our lives, God ***is*** with us. Amen.