O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

I've always found it a bit ambiguous to spend the Advent Season looking forward to the coming of Christ when we know that he has already come. The ambiguity renders the final arrival of Christmas somewhat anticlimactic – in the sense of wondering what's all the excitement about, other than celebrating an event that took place long ago, even though we believe that its full effect is still with us?

I find that if I shift gears a bit, however, I can save something of the genuine newness of Christ’s coming, because Christ continues to come into each of our worlds every day with a special newness. Christ’s Spirit is ever fresh, giving new directions to our Church and to us individually. We can look forward to these comings and celebrate them when they occur, maybe not with Christmas trees, presents, and pumpkin pie, but with a gentle lifting of the spirit that brings a smile or a sigh. In fact isn't this what St. Ignatius asks us to do in the daily examen of consciousness? To thank God for the blessings of the day, the many signs of God’s love for us?

Something along these lines happened to me last month. I went down to El Salvador along with a number of other North Americans of the Jesuit/Ignatian family to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the deaths of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter. We also celebrated the memory of Archbishop Oscar Romero. I had gone down there with the attitude of a pilgrim, expecting to explore and perhaps experience a bit what took place a quarter of a century earlier, a trip of remembrance only. But at the two large masses, celebrated at the UCA on Saturday for about 5000 and in the local Cathedral on Sunday for about 1000, what I discovered was that the lives of all these martyrs have risen again into the lives of the people who came to celebrate the on-going gift of their lives. I experienced newness, not nostalgia. The event of 25 years ago was still with them, alive and well and ever fresh, and the people brought it alive in me.
It seems to me that that experience in El Salvador is not unlike our celebration of Christmas. The birth of Jesus some 2000+ years ago is still with us, alive and well.