He Came in Weakness, He will Come to Reign
Luke 1:26-33

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, these four Sundays leading up to Christmas when the church looks back at Christ's first coming and forward to his second. And we're starting by looking at this passage from Luke's gospel about the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary. And if you're not numbed to it by over-familiarity, this account might have some of you thinking, 'Angels? Really?' And consciously or subconsciously you're thinking in the realm of fairy tales, because, of course, we all know angels aren't really real, and this didn't really happen, because the only reason people like Luke believed in things like angels was because that was the culture they'd grown up in and we know better now.

But what if the reason you *don't* believe in them is because of the culture *you've* grown up in? Because you and I live in a disenchanted, scientific materialistic world where you're told no-one believes in this stuff today. When in reality, the whole rest of the world does, and they think it's you who are irrational not to believe in angels and demons, because, "can't you see?, they're everywhere!" And so it's not just, as CS Lewis once said, that we can be guilty of chronological snobbery - in thinking these people in the past were just not as intelligent as us, it's that when we assume that the only things that are real are what we can see, or bring to the boil in a lab, then we're guilty of cultural snobbery as well.

But of course, Luke doesn't begin his gospel with the angel appearing to Mary, but to Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, who 'was barren.' (1:7). And in the Bible, whenever a barren, or an unloved woman takes the stage, or an angel appears, or both, you just know something's about to happen. And so when Luke begins his gospel, with a barren Elizabeth, and an angel appearing, and a young virgin Mary, and a baby about to be born, you know heaven is about to break in.

The Longed for King
CS Lewis is probably best known for his children's books, the Chronicles of Narnia. But he also wrote an adult science fiction trilogy. And the last in the trilogy is called 'That Hideous Strength.' And in the story, Merlin, the wizard of King Arthur's court, is raised from centuries of sleep to fight one last battle against the forces of evil. Su and I used to live in Winchester, the ancient capital of England. And there's a part of Winchester called Sleepers Hill, where King Arthur is supposedly buried, sleeping until England is in trouble, whereupon he'll rise from sleep and ride out to the rescue. The problem is, England has been in so much trouble he hasn't been able to decide which one to come out for.

But that desire for a king, or for a strong leader, who will come to our defence and defeat our enemies, is a powerful one, isn't it? And for the people of Israel it was one that refused to die.

You see, David had been their great king - he'd secured their borders, and defeated their enemies, and established justice, at the same time as loving God and the people. And he became the gold-standard for all future kings. And yet, the Bible tells us he was far from perfect. Did he bring justice? Yes. But he was also a source of injustice, taking another man's wife. Did he defeat Israel's enemies? Yes, but he was also willing to arrange the death of the man who's wife he'd taken at the hands of those enemies. And as a result, David's own family was ravaged by sin.

And if David was the gold-standard for all future kings, he was also the high-water mark, because after him it was downhill all the way. His son Solomon married foreign women and introduced pagan worship, and taxed the people to breaking point. And when his son took the throne, the northern tribes rebelled and the kingdom split. And with a few exceptions things went from bad to worse from then on. And even the good kings made dubious foreign policy decisions or got involved in military adventures that weren't theirs to fight.

But, if you think about it, that's always the problem with leaders, isn't it? They let you down. You hope, this next one's going to be the real deal, and turn the tide, and restore hope, maybe even restore the nation, or organisation; and stand for justice and defeat our enemies, whoever those enemies are. But at best, they never quite live up to the expectation, and at worse, they're revealed to be deeply flawed individuals.

And yet, it was that longing for a righteous king that sustained Israel. And they clung to God's promise to David that he would have a son whose rule would last forever; and the message through the prophets that a king would come who would cut off the chariots of war, and speak peace to the nations, and whose rule would be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth (Zech 9).

And so while there are some leaders whose term we wish was over before it's allotted time; and while Lord Acton wrote, 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.' This king was going to be different.

But it's not just Israel who longed for leaders like that, is it? There's a sense in which we all do. Something inside us longs for leadership that seeks the good of those it leads, that establishes justice and right over wrong, that vanquishes the enemies of all that is good. A leadership that puts everything right. And yet, this world repeatedly fails to give us the leaders we long for. And so maybe, like ancient Israel, what we're really longing for is a leader from another world.

Which is why our ears should prick up at what Luke tells us in v27, that the angel was sent 'to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, *of the house of David*.' Because that means something is stirring in the line of the kings.

And the angel says to Mary, v30, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called *the Son of the Most High*." You see, David and his descendants who took the throne were called 'sons of God'. But this baby Mary was to carry was going to be *the* Son of God. The ultimate Son. The one who unlike all previous rulers would reign in perfect submission and perfect relationship with his Heavenly Father. The one King in whom heaven and earth would truly meet.

And then the angel says, v32, "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But how does this king they've all been longing for come? Because when Mary finally gives birth to him, she doesn't wrap him in silk sheets and lay him in an intricately carved cot, in a gilded palace, does she? but in a manger in the outhouse of an inn which has no room for him. And when he began his ministry, Jesus based himself not in Jerusalem, the city of Kings, but Nazareth.

Now, when I was a teenager, we moved to a town called Bognor Regis, but if you came from Bognor, you never admitted it. And so my parents would say we came from Chichester, a beautiful cathedral city, which is so much posher than Bognor. But Jesus chose Bognor, or at least Nazareth. Because when Nathaniel, a future disciple, was told that's where Jesus came from, he scoffed: Nazareth!? Can anything good come out of Nazareth??

A few days ago, Su and I went to Schilliger's Garden Centre, which is always worth a visit at Christmas. And this year they have outdone themselves. Not only is there the usual artic Christmas scene with moving polar bears. There's also a stunning underwater scene, complete with Christmas coral reefs and illuminated jelly fish. And you can buy gold lobsters to grace your Christmas dining table.

But think of the contrast of all that opulence and the arrival of this longed for King whose birth it's supposed to be celebrating. Because when he came, there were no golden lobsters on the table for him. And despite all the advance notice of how glorious his reign would be, his birth, life and death were anything but glorious.

And yet, to a man, the New Testament writers say he was and is the King. And while he came in poverty he will return in glory.

The Coming King

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn is the heir to the throne of men. Except when Frodo first meets him, Aragorn looks nothing like a king. But Tolkien writes, 'All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be woken, A light from the shadows shall spring; Renewed shall be blade that was broken, The crownless again shall be king.'

And the apostle Paul calls Jesus of Nazareth, not just king, but 'the King of kings' (1 Tim 6:15) - the king over every king. And Peter, a man who knew Jesus better than any, and who was well aware of his lack of worldly glory says, 'To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever' (1 Peter 4:11). And John wrote, 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.' (Rev 1:7). And when he talks about clouds, he's not talking meteorology. He's looking back to Daniel's vision, of one like a son of man, who approached the Ancient of Days, with the clouds of heaven, and was given 'dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.' (Dan 7:14). And when he comes again, John says, he will come like a conquering king. And Paul tells us when he does he will once and for ever put down his enemies 'by the splendour of his coming' (2 Thess 2:8).

It's why Paul writes, 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.' (Phil 2:10-11). Because one day, whether we like it or not, everyone will acknowledge he really is the ultimate king, to whom all must give allegiance.

But there lies a problem, doesn't it? Because while at one level we long for a leader this world cannot give us, none of us want to be ruled. We like the idea of justice provided it's other people who are on the receiving end. We like the idea of enemies being conquered, provided, they're my

enemies, and I'm not one of them. We like the idea of the right being established, provided it's my version of what's right. In short, in our highly individualistic culture, we like the idea of a king, provided I'm the king; at least the king of my own life. And the idea of a long promised king is great, but not if he asserts his rule over me. It's why, in Romans 5, Paul describes us as God's enemies. We're instinctively opposed to his rule over us. And so the coming King is also the unwelcome king.

In his book *The Last Word*, the American philosopher and atheist, Thomas Nagel wrote, "I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that *this cosmic authority problem is not rare*."

In other words, Nagel wants order, but no Creator. He wants justice, but no Judge. He wants right to triumph over wrong, but no King who does the triumphing. Because if there is a King, then there's an authority problem. A problem of who has the final authority of my life.

But how do you deal with that problem? You see, for those of us who are already Christians, we welcome, and at Advent we celebrate, the coming of Christ the King, and yet what are you supposed to do about those areas of your life where you know there's a fight for control going on? Where you know things aren't as Christ the king wants them to be, but if you're honest, you're ok with keeping control.

And if you're not yet a Christian, what are you supposed to do when you're honest enough to admit with Nagel that you've got an authority problem - that your objections to Christianity are based less on fact, and more on authority and who has it in your life? That you like what Christianity stands for, may even like Christ the teacher, it's Christ the King you don't like.

The Servant King

I was once talking to a young man who'd become a Christian from a muslim background, and he described what got him over the line to believing in Christ. It was the account in John's gospel of the crowd wanting to make Jesus king by force, because they were so taken by him. And this young man said, that's when I realised Jesus really was the king, because if that crowd had come to Mohammed, to make him king, Mohammed would have said, 'great idea! Where's the throne?' But the gospel says, seeing that's what they wanted to do, Jesus withdrew from there. That it was Jesus' refusal to be a king like every other king that told this young man - he is the king. Because he's the one man to whom Satan offered all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory, if only he would worship him, if only he would let something other than God be God, and Jesus replied, "be gone, Satan." He's offered the power that corrupts and he refuses it. Why? Because he's the truly great man who's not a bad man. Because he's the true and ultimate Son of David, the one man after God's own heart.

And yet, why was he tried before Pilate? On the charge of claiming to be King. And the soldiers mocked him as king, dressing him in a robe, giving him a reed for a sceptre, and thorns for a crown. And as he's nailed to the cross, above his head are nailed the words, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. And it's as if the cross has become his throne.

But why does the one who could call legions of angels to fight on his side not call them? Why does he allow men like Pilate, whom power has corrupted, have power over him? Because of you. Because as he gives himself into their hands, he's giving himself in place of you. Because at the cross he bore the wrath of God for all those times when we've insisted we're the king. And as you look at him hanging on the cross, you're looking at the King of Kings giving his life for rebels. For us. As Paul says, 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Rom 5:8).

And if you're not yet a Christian, let that get you across the line. As you see the King promised from ages past, leave the glory of heaven and become a nobody in his birth, someone from Nazareth in his life, and your substitute in his death, and he does it to save you when you were his enemy, that's what can melt your heart. That's what can solve your cosmic authority problem and cause you to cede control. Because that's the measure of his love for you.

But it's also what'll do it for us who are already Christians. You see, just being told you should do something sets off this battle for authority, doesn't it? Christ is my King, but I want to stay King of this area. And so if you're to surrender that area, you need to want something more than your control. You need to see something more beautiful than that. And what is more beautiful than the King of all Kings humbling himself and becoming a servant for you, so that you can reign in life with him? A King who you can entrust every area of your life to; who you know, 'if he loves me like this, he will never abandon me.'

And that's what'll fill your heart with awe and wonder this Advent. Not Schilligers Christmas decorations, as amazing as they are, but the beauty and mercy of a God who gives himself for us.