The True King Has Come
Luke 2:1-20

So this is the Second Sunday of Advent. What does *Advent* mean? It comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means *coming*. And that tells you something. Ultimately, Christianity is not simply another philosophy, rather Christianity is rooted in the physical, in real time events. And central to its claims is that 2000 years ago, in the birth of Christ, God physically, literally, broke into our world.

And in our advent series we're looking at some of the people who got caught up in the stories of that first advent. This week we're looking at the shepherds.

Read Luke 2:1-20

Now, as we look at this passage, how many kings are mentioned? Three – we're going to look at each one.

The King in Command
Have you ever experienced a time in your life, maybe you're experiencing it now, when it feels like your life is out of control? When you feel at the mercy events. That you just can't see how this is going to turn out, or how things will turn around, and you don't like it. Or your stress levels are rising to the point where you wonder if you can cope. And you wish things would stop spinning, or you wish you could know there was a plan, or that you had some sense of security that somehow, in all the mess, things really did make sense.

Well, I think Mary and Joseph could legitimately have felt like that, couldn't they? They were young, and she was pregnant, and being unmarried they're socially vulnerable. And they're made to leave their homes in late pregnancy to travel 150 miles or so to another town, which would have been a huge distance in those days, and all because of the seemingly random order of someone in power thousands of miles away. And whilst there, Mary ends up giving birth in a shed used for animals. It's not exactly the kind of life you'd plan or dream of, is it? And they could legitimately be thinking that everything was happening outside their control, that they had no control, that they were just like pieces of rubbish blown and tossed about in the wind of someone else's decisions.

Verse 1: 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.' And here's the guy with the power. This is king no 1: Caesar Augustus, undisputed emperor of the world's superpower. A man who could issue a command from Rome that all nations under his control be taxed, and everyone obeys. A man with a vast civil service of administrators and regional rulers under him, powerful men like Quirinius, governor of Syria, who obey him. A man whose image was printed on the coins of the day, and on which he was styled Saviour of the world, Son of the divine, and *pontifex maximus* – the great high priest.

So, at the start of Luke's account, there's no question where power and control lies, is there? It's not with Mary and Joseph, it's embodied in the man Caesar Augustus.

But he's not the only king Luke mentions, is he? Verse 4, 'And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is

called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.' And David had been Israel's greatest king; the king by whom all other Israelite kings were judged; the gold standard for kings.

Except those glory days must have seemed a very long time ago, mustn't they? In fact, a thousand long years ago, as Joseph and Mary, David's descendants, made their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to enroll in Caesar's census and pay his taxes. Because now, it wasn't David's royal line that called the shots – it was Rome. It was Caesar, not the house of David, in command.

And yet whilst that was how it seemed on the surface, the reality was a little different wasn't it? You see, there's a third king mentioned here. Verse 11, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ *the Lord*." And on the surface this Lord, this king, seems the weakest and most vulnerable of them all, doesn't he? Born in a stable, wrapped in cloths, laid in a manger, seemingly at the mercy of everyone else.

Or is he? You see, listen to what the prophet Micah wrote 700 years before: 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.' (Micah 5:2).

So, far from Mary and Joseph being swept along by events controlled in Rome, far from the baby Jesus being at the mercy of others, what was happening that night in Bethlehem was God's doing, that behind the decisions of Caesar and Quirinius, behind the calling of a census and the raising of taxes, God was at work ensuring that his Son, the greatest of kings, would be born in Bethlehem, the family town of David.

Now how many of you have handled a new born baby? What did it feel like? Can you remember how you worried you would do it all wrong? And you worried about supporting the head, and not letting it drop. Well, imagine handling this baby! Because as Mary and Joseph wrap this baby in swaddling cloths and lower him into a feeding trough, they are handling the One by whom and for whom, Paul tells us, 'all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible' (Col 1:16). The one in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col 1:19).

And so of these three kings, it's not the seemingly triumphant might of Rome, it is this infant who is the one with the real power. And yet he has humbled himself completely.

But why? And what has it got to do with those times when you feel like life is out of control?

A Story of Great Joy

Look at v10. The angel appears to the shepherds and says, "Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Now, have any of you ever seen a baby being born? If you have, you'll know that there is something incredible about it. It can be deeply moving. I've seen grown men cry as the

miracle of this new life breaks upon them. And yet in all its poverty and anonymity, this birth exceeded every other.

Listen to how the prophet Isaiah puts it: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. *For* to us a child is born, to us a son is given.' Isaiah 9:2-6.

So why does Isaiah say that Israel then, and by extension you and me now, can know hope when you feel oppressed and powerless, when you feel over-run by events or even enemies? How can you know hope in the midst of the chaos of life? Because, Isaiah says, to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And he goes on: 'and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end' (Isaiah 9:6-7).

So what the events of this first Christmas tell you is that you can have hope whatever you face, whenever you face it, because the one who has ultimate power has come, and come for a reason.

And it's the reason why he's come that tells you why his birth is good news of great joy. You see, imagine that one day you're out with Lukas or Stephan, or worse still, with both of them! And at one point in the day, you find yourself dangling from a cliff edge, holding on by your finger-tips, and if you fall you're dead. But then over the top of the cliff a head pokes and calls out, 'Fear not, I'm coming to rescue you!' And this person absails down and starts pulling you up. How will you feel? Well, it all depends on whether you were in danger, won't it. If the boys were taking you rock climbing and everything was under control, and you weren't at any risk, you'll see this person as an interfering busybody. But if you were stuck, and your rope was broken, and your strength was failing and your fingers were slipping, and the boys had abandoned you, and you knew you could never save yourself, and that you're in deep trouble, you will greet this guy's appearance with joy. In fact, you'll probably consider yourself forever in his debt for rescuing you.

And the angel tells the shepherds that it's not as a busybody that Christ has come, but as just such a rescuer. Verse 11 again, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour." But the question, of course, is to save us from what? What's he a Saviour from? You see when you look at what troubles you in life, or stresses you out, or make you unhappy, maybe you wish he'd save you from that: from the stress you're under, or that relationship that's gone sour, or that feeling that things are spinning out of control. But whilst knowing Jesus has come can give you peace and poise in the troubles of life, he hasn't come to give you a trouble free life. It's not trouble he's come to save you from. Listen to how the angel broke the news to Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, in the first place: "You

shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21).

You see, what the Bible tells us is that at the root of our anxieties and fears, at the root of our world seemingly spinning out of control, and our feeling abandoned and overwhelmingly lonely in our troubles, is our alienation and separation from God our Father. And at the root of that, from Eden onwards, is that we want to be king, we want to be Caesar, we want to be the one calling the shots. In a sense, we want to take God's place, and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. But as a result, we're cut off from the one who really is in control, from the one who makes sense of all of life, the one who genuinely knows what is right and wrong. And it's to heal that breech, and to save us from its consequences, that Christ has come.

Which is why the angel calls Christ's birth, "Good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10) – because it's life-transforming good news.

Good News to Change Your Life

I don't know if you've seen them, but there are a number of extraordinary contrasts in Luke's account here, and one of them is what's going on in the stable, and what's going on in the field. In the stable, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the one with ultimate power and glory is born without any glory, in all the blood and mess of child birth and in the dark and the dirt of an outhouse. Whilst in the field, God's glory overwhelms a bunch of farm labourers.

Verse 8-9, 'And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.' And fear is an appropriate response to seeing the glory and the greatness of God, isn't it. Especially when you're considered the lowest of the low, as shepherds were, and you've come to believe that.

And yet the angel tells them that they've no reason to be afraid. That this is good news, not bad news. And not just for them, but for everyone – because in the birth of Christ, God has done something that can finally deal with the problem under all our problems: our wanting to be king or queen. And in dealing with that he also deals with our fears when life seems out of control.

You see, the coming of Jesus into our world tells you that your sin and your shame have been dealt with. After all, Jesus said he came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. And at the cross he paid the price for everything we have ever done that we should not have done, and every thing we should have done but haven't done. So Jesus' coming tells you, your alienation and separation from God has been dealt with. Your sins are forgiven, and so in their place God brings peace and joy to your troubled and burdened heart.

But secondly, when you see that Christ came and humbled himself to the lowest place, to save you, you know that he loves you, and loves you with an everlasting love. And when you know that, then when life is hard the circumstances don't need to shake you, rather instead of fear you can know a strong joy that God is

for you. That he's in control, and working everything for your good, whatever seems to be happening.

After all, the events of Christmas tell you that there are no mistakes, are there? No chance happenings. You're not at the mercy of anyone else, any more than Mary and Joseph were at the mercy of Caesar. You're in the hands of the God who is more merciful than you can ever imagine: Your heavenly Father who loves you so much he would send his Son for you.

And that can do a third thing for you. You see, one of the dangers of going through hard times is that you can become very self-focused. You withdraw into yourself, and you stop seeing life as an opportunity to love and serve others, instead you start thinking – I've just got to get through this, I need to look out for number one. But when you see what's going on in that stable, you realize that the ultimate king humbled himself and did so to serve you, even when you didn't deserve it. And when you're rock solid secure in his love for you, you can serve and love others even when you're facing hard times.

So, this advent and Christmas, take a leaf out of the shepherds book, v15, and "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened" because if we do, it can seriously change our lives.