The King in The Manger
Luke 2:1-15

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. And we get that word from the Latin word *adventus*, which means *coming*. Now, as we worked our way through 1 Thessalonians we saw repeatedly that our great hope as Christians is the second coming of the Lord Jesus. But if that is true, it's even more the case that the foundation of our faith rests on the fact of his *first* coming, on his advent.

You see, fundamentally, Christianity is not a philosophy, is it? It's not that Christians subscribe to a set of principles, and it's all centred on a set of intellectual ideas. Ultimately, Christianity is rooted in the physical, in real historical events, in the real-world, real-time, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

And in all the fun and the feasting that's going to come our way over the next few weeks, this is what Advent and Christmas celebrate, isn't it? That 2000 years ago, God did something extraordinary and, literally, broke into our world.

Now, I don't know who you're planning to have over for Christmas. But imagine that every Christmas you have the same guest. Aunty Madge. And aunty Madge means a lot to you. But over the years, she's become part of the furniture, and the truth is you've sort of forgotten why she's special, and you kind of take her presence for granted: Of course aunty Madge will be there, it's Christmas.

Well, the danger is that we can have that kind of attitude when we read what the Bible tells us was going on that first Christmas. The words can be so familiar that they've lost their wonder. We've forgotten why they're special. And so over the next few weeks, as we prepare for Christmas, we're going to be looking at a passage from Luke's gospel, which you may know very well. But my prayer is that the sheer wonder of what God was up to that first Christmas would break upon all of our hearts afresh.

Luke 2:1-15

A Tale of Three Kings
Now it's obvious that these events Luke records, involve one king, isn't it? He tells us in v1: 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.' So here is Caesar Augustus, Octavian, adopted son of Julius Caesar, undisputed emperor of the world's superpower. A man who can issue a command from Rome that all nations under his control be taxed, that they should be enrolled in this census, and everyone obeys. A man with a vast civil service of administrators and regional rulers under him, men like Quirinius, governor of Syria. A man who on the coins of the day was styled Saviour of the world, Son of the divine, pontifex maximus – the great high priest. So, as Luke opens this chapter, if you had to put your money on where the power and the authority lay, you wouldn't need to look further than this man Augustus.

But then there's a second king who Luke mentions. 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 a thousand years before, David had been Israel's greatest king. Sure, the scale of his reign had been nothing in comparison to Caesar Augustus, but for the people of Israel, David was the heyday – the one whom God had chosen to rule

over his people, to whom God had promised that one of his sons would always rule on the throne of Judah.

But as Joseph and Mary, David's descendants, made their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, David's ancestral home, those days of David's glory, those days of promise, must have seemed a very long way away.

I don't know if you saw this in the press last week, but some weeks ago a great-grandson of Tsar Alexandra III, the last but one Russian Tsar, died. But he didn't die a prince or a duke, in a palace. He died virtually unknown and alone in a caravan park in a small little town in the Australian outback. Such was the fall of the Russian royal family.

And though for very different reasons, for reasons of moral and spiritual decay, David's royal line had suffered just such a fall. The king of Judah now wasn't a son of David, it was Herod the Great. Except he wasn't so great. He was a murderous tyrant, and an Edomite, a foreigner. But where the real power lay everyone knew. And Joseph and Mary had to make the journey to Bethlehem, to register and pay taxes to Caesar Augustus, precisely because he was the real power in the land.

And yet, the extraordinary thing is that though this is how it all appeared, the reality was very different, wasn't it? Because Luke talks of a third king here, and on the surface he appears to be the weakest and most powerless and most destitute and most vulnerable of them all.

Verse 6-7, 'And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.'

And Jesus, Son of David, King of the Jews, was born into the poverty and squalor of a stable. But just think how he got there! You see, 700 years before, the prophet Micah had forseen the fall of Israel. He had seen that under the corrupt and idolatrous leadership of David's descendants, the kingdom would be conquered by foreign rulers. But in all that darkness, Micah saw a bright, burning light on the horizon. Listen to what he said:

'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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace' (Micah 5:2-5).

And so as Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem, they were part of this incredible drama that the Lord was orchestrating to see Jesus, Son of David, born in Bethlehem, the family town of David.

And just ponder for a moment what that tells you about where the power really lies in these events. You see, years later, the apostle Paul wrote, 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman' (Gal 4:4). Listen to that: *When the fullness of time had come*. In God's perfect timing, not in Caesar's or Quirinius' timing, but in God's timing. All the time Augustus and Quirinius thought that they were orchestrating events, that they were the ones holding the power, that they were calling the shots, when in reality it was the Lord. And if you were a normal Israelite, trying to scrape together a living, you might think you were totally at the mercy of these overlords and their decision making. And they thought that this was all about a census, and control of a subjugated people, and the collection of taxes, when in fact that was just surface stuff. Underneath, the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth was working out his plan and his purpose to see His Son, the one true king, be born in Bethlehem, the seat of David.

Because that is the extraordinary thing going on here. I mean, do you remember what it was like to handle a new born baby for the very first time? And you worry you're going to do it all wrong, and you hold them gingerly, and cautiously, and you don't want to damage them. Well, imagine handling this baby. That as Mary and Joseph wrap this baby in swaddling cloths and lower him into a feeding trough, they are handling the eternal Son of God, now a baby boy. Because that is who they are wrapping up and laying down. Was he Mary's 'firstborn son' as Luke tells us here in v7? Sure he was. But he was also 'the firstborn of all creation', as Paul says in Colossians (1:7), the heir of everything, by whom and for whom '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). As John tells us in the opening of his gospel: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14), the revelation of all that God is, became a fragile, vulnerable, human baby. And Mary and Joseph wrapped him up in cloths, and laid him in a manger in Bethlehem, in all the mess of a stable.

And so of these three kings, it's not the failed house and line of David, 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. Because it's not possessing power that matters, is it? It's how you use it.

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, if you have ever witnessed it, you'll know that there is something incredible about childbirth. It can be deeply moving. I've seen grown men cry as the miracle and the joy of this new life breaks upon them. And yet in all its poverty and anonymity, this birth exceeded every other.

You see, the prophet Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophet Micah. And just like Micah he too foresaw the invasion and destruction coming on the people of Israel. But like Micah, he also knew that something far better was coming down the road. Listen how he 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.

Why can they, and you and me, know hope in the midst of the chaos and destruction of life? Why is there hope when you feel oppressed and powerless and over-run by the enemy? Because, Isaiah says, to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy because of who he is. As Isaiah goes on: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; 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, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore' (Isaiah 9:6-7).

But there's hope, not just because of who he is, but because of why he's come. You see, the news of his birth is only good news of great joy when you realize how desperate your own situation would be if he didn't come. I mean, imagine you are dangling from a cliff edge, holding on by your finger-nails, and the ground is meters below you, and if you fall, you're dead. But then over the top of the cliff a head pokes and calls out, 'don't be afraid, be happy, I'm coming to rescue you.' And this person absails down and starts pulling you up. How will you feel? It will all depend on whether you thought you were in danger, won't it. If you wanted to be there, and you were enjoying a nice afternoon rock climbing, and you didn't think you were at any risk, you won't be happy about it at all, you'll see this other person as an interfering busybody. You didn't see yourself in any danger, and you won't thank him. But if you knew that your strength was failing and your fingers were slipping and you knew you could never save yourself, that unless someone rescued you, you were in deep trouble, then your attitude to your rescuer is going to be very different. You will greet his appearance with joy and you will thank him profusely, and you will consider yourself forever in his debt for coming to rescue you.

And Jesus, the wonderful counselor and mighty God, humbled himself to the poverty of the stable and the squalor of our world, not to please himself, but to rescue us. Every other religion has it that you need to inch up that rock face, that you need to save yourself, that you need, somehow, to build your ladder to God. It is only in Christianity that God comes down the ladder to save you. And when you know you need saving, from your sin and from yourself, when you know that you need a saviour, the truth that your King has come to do just that fills your heart with joy. When you know just how poor you are, the truth that he who was rich beyond all splendour, became poor for you, that you might become rich, when you know that the King of Kings became a mere statistic of the empire, so that you might become a beloved subject in his kingdom, it does something in your heart. Joy comes.

But as joy comes, something else goes.

The Answer to Your Fears

There is a beautiful contrast in Luke's account, between what is going on in the stable, and what is going on in the field. In the stable the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is being born in all the blood and mess of child birth, unnoticed by all but his mother and Joseph, in the dark and the dirt of an outhouse. Whilst in the field, the glory of God is overwhelming 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 it wasn't that these guys were especially timid was it? Fear is the right response to seeing the glory and the greatness of God. Whenever that happens in the Bible, people always ended up on their face.

And yet the angel tells them that they have no reason to be afraid. That this is good news, not bad news. And in the birth of Christ, God has done something that can finally deal with our fears. He has done something that warrants the angel to say, 'fear not', not just to these shepherds, but to speak those words into everyone of our lives.

I mean, just consider Mary and Joseph for a moment. They had every reason to feel anxious and afraid and to be consumed by worry. She is 9 months pregnant and they have to travel. When they get to Bethlehem there is no room at the inn. They would have been justified to feel at the mercy of events, powerless to control the circumstances around them, like bits of trash blown about on the wind of Caesar's decisions. And yet in all those circumstances, God was in sovereign control. They weren't at the whim of anyone's decisions were they? They were in the hands of their heavenly Father who loved them more than they could ever know.

And what was true for them is true for you and me, whatever we face in life. And the events of Christmas tell us that there are no mistakes. There are no chance happenings. We are never at the mercy of anyone else. Our heavenly Father knows what he is doing, even in those times when it feels like nothing is working out, even then he is working for your good and his glory.

And when you know what God is doing in the birth of this baby in Bethlehem, you know that your heavenly Father loves you. So whatever else you feel in life, you can know a depth of security that the safety of circumstances can never give you.

And that sense of security can free you from another fear. The fear of service, the fear of being taken advantage of. You see, don't you think it's interesting, that the message comes, not to Caesar Augustus in Rome, not to Quirinius in his governor's palace, but to a bunch of shepherds, working a night shift in a field? Total unknowns. They're hardly the elite, are they?

But nothing changes, does it? The message of Advent, of the coming of Christ, is only good news of great joy if you are humble enough to realise that you're not the king in the story. But when you realise that the real king has humbled himself to serve you, it frees you from the fear of serving him and others, because you're rock solid secure in his love for you.

So this Christmas, as we see how he humbled himself for us, I pray we would all humble ourselves, in worship of him, in service of others, and in joy receive him as our king.