

The Crownless shall be King

Luke 2:1-7

Traditionally, Advent has been a time of waiting and reflection - waiting and reflecting on the coming of Christ. But, I suspect, at times it can feel less like a time of reflection and more like a time of distraction. There are all the activities that go with the season: the parties, the shopping, the travelling, and, if you've got kids at school, those are multiplied infinitesimally.

But if that's the case, then we need the message of Advent more than ever. Because, if we let it, Advent makes us consider these two intertwined issues of identity and values. It makes us ponder - who the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger is. And if he is who we're told he is, then it makes us confront what we most value in life. It makes us question where we get our identity and the kind of people we're trying to be.

So, we're going to look at three things: the Power of Caesar, the Humility of Christ and the gift of God.

The Power of Caesar

Look at v1: 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.' And as one writer puts it, 'so begins the most famous narrative in history.'

And it begins with Caesar Augustus - a man born into a wealthy, prestigious family, who was adopted by Julius Caesar and made his heir, and so became the undisputed emperor of the Roman Empire. A king who can issue decrees and people obey him. A king who can move people across the known world with the power of his word. A king who people listen to. And why do his decrees have that kind of power? Because behind his word lies the full military might and power of Rome.

And so Caesar has all the things that we think make you someone, that give you status or meaning in life. He has an illustrious background. He has wealth, and power, and status, and influence. A man people listen to. If there was a list of the hundred most influential people of his day, Caesar would be number 1.

And so the contrast with what was going on, thousands of miles from Rome, as a result of his decree, couldn't be greater, could they? Look at v3-4, 'And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.'

And the people of Judea bitterly resented the power that this foreign king, Caesar, had over them. His power to order their lives only brought home to them their lack of power. Because they considered themselves God's people, not Caesar's people. And yet, while Caesar could issue decrees from Rome, and had the military power to back them up, there had been no word from God for over 400 years since the voice of the last prophet fell silent.

And so now it's Caesar's word that holds sway in Judea. And so, at Caesar's order, Joseph goes to Bethlehem, the city of David, because, v4, 'he was of the house and lineage of David.'

Think about that. The house and lineage of David, King of Judah. And if God had not spoken for 400 years, there had been no king on David's throne for over 500. The line of David had been

broken when Jerusalem fell to Babylon, in 587BC. And there had been no king in the line of David since. That's longer than France, longer than the United States, have had no king.

But now, at Caesar's decree, Joseph, a descendant of David makes the journey to David's city, with Mary his young, and pregnant, betrothed. But Bethlehem is hardly a city, is it? In comparison to Rome, Bethlehem's just a small village. Rome, were Caesar sat, was the capital of the world's superpower. Bethlehem, where Joseph was headed, was a nowhere place in the backwaters of the Empire.

And when they arrive, Luke tells us in v6, that 'the time came for her to give birth.' Now, today, expectant mums are encouraged to write up their birth plans, aren't they? What they want to happen when they're giving birth. 'I want my husband to be there with me, and rub my back with nicely scented oils', and all that sort of thing. Well, I suspect that going into labour in a strange place, away from home, probably wasn't in Mary's birth plan, was it?

But, hey, someone in Bethlehem will take them in. Someone will give Mary a bed, and a room, won't they? Verse 7, 'And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.'

Where do you think Caesar Augustus spent that night? Probably in his palace, waited on by servants, and guarded by legions. And Jesus is born outside, in a stable, or a cave, or a courtyard, we don't know, and laid in an animals' feeding trough, because there was no room in the inn. Caesar Augustus was secure and comfortable that night. Jesus was exposed and vulnerable.

But why was there no room in the inn? Did no one in Bethlehem have a room? I mean sure, maybe the village was packed with visitors for the census. But would no one offer a young woman in labour shelter? I mean, if a young mother was giving birth outside your house, isn't it the most basic response to get them off the street and bring them in out of the cold? That's what anyone would do, isn't it? I mean even if you didn't know them, even if they looked foreign, even if they were unlike you, you'd help them, wouldn't you? And Mary was one like them, yet they didn't.

So why the lack of pity?

Well, probably, it's the fact that she's unmarried, in an age and culture where that was deeply stigmatizing. And so literally, and figuratively, Mary is left out in the cold. As one writer (Christopher Ash) puts it, she was 'frozen out of Bethlehem society.' And it's as if Jesus begins his life in disgrace.

But Caesar Augustus experienced no such sideways glances, did he? I mean, had he wanted a room that night, rooms would have been cleared for him. But then, Caesar sat at the very top of society, welcomed and honoured, but Jesus enters our world and is pushed to the margins, and wrapped in cloths and laid in a feeding trough.

And yet, what that writer calls 'the greatest narrative in history' ultimately isn't about Caesar. Despite the fact that Caesar has all the things we think make you a high value person; that set you out as someone to be admired, or listened to; the kind of things we might aspire to: wealth, position, power, breeding, influence; it's this sidelined baby in the manger who takes centre stage. So, who is he?

The Humility of Christ

Look at what Micah, the Old Testament prophet wrote around 700BC: ‘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).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, there’s a character called Aragorn. And he’s heir to the kingdom of men. Except, when we first meet him, he doesn’t look anything like a king. He looks like a traveller, in from the wild, down on his luck. But the first clue you get to his true identity is in a letter Gandalf writes to Frodo, in a poem: ‘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 born in disgrace, left out in the cold of polite society, wrapped in cloths, laid in a feeding trough, Jesus looks anything but a king. Caesar yes, but not Christ. And yet the prophet Micah is saying that from small, backwater Bethlehem would come a ruler whose line stretched back through and even beyond David, to ancient days. And that like David, he would be a shepherd king, a king in the image of God, Israel’s ultimate shepherd. But his realm, Micah says, will be greater than Israel, instead he will be great to the ends of the earth.

You see, while Caesar was great, in reality his empire was over some, not all the earth. But Micah says, this baby born in Bethlehem, and now lying in a manger, will rule an empire that has no boundaries. That the crownless shall indeed be king. And he will rule, Micah says, not in the military might of Rome, or any other earthly empire, but, v4, ‘in the strength of the Lord.’

But what of his word? If Caesar can command people to leave their homes by issuing decrees, what can this infant in the manger do when he speaks? Well, listen to those famous words with which John opens his gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1:1). In other words, Caesar can issue decrees, but this baby lying in the manger is God’s eternal decree. More than that, he is the One who issues them, as John goes on to say, ‘All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.’ (John 1:3). That he’s the One who only has to speak and galaxies form and stars shine. As the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the power of his word.’ (Heb 1:3). And when he finally began his ministry, Jesus just had to say the word and storms stilled, and the sick were healed, and lepers were cleansed, and demons fled, and the dead were raised.

And that is who we’re told this baby lying in the manger is. In the words of the Christmas carol, ‘Veiled in flesh the godhead see, hail the incarnate deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.’ That within that animal feeding trough, in that bundle of rags, lay Immanuel, God-with-us.

So why humble himself like that? If this is the king above every king, why the disgrace, why the poverty, why the being frozen out? Why does the king come crownless?

The Gift of God

Look at what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'

Why did Christ come to the lowest place? To lift you to the highest; to make you rich. But not with the riches of a Caesar - the riches of power, or wealth, or fame, the kind of riches that inevitably corrode, even eat you up; but with the riches of his grace. The riches of knowing that you are loved and accepted by God.

You see, if Jesus began his life in disgrace, it ended the same: shunned by the community he found himself in. Abandoned by his friends when he was in most need, and crucified as one cursed by God - as if God himself didn't even want him. But he was excluded, so that you might be welcomed in. He was disgraced so that you might be honoured. There was no room for him, at his birth and at his death, that there might be room for us - in his Father's house.

And as king, he became vulnerable, Micah says, that we might 'dwell secure' (Mic 5:4). That we can experience the inner security, and know the eternal security, that the riches of Caesar can never give you.

And Micah says, 'And he shall be their peace.' (Micah 5:5). You see, if Advent can be crazy, filled with 'doing', the whole of life can, as well, can't it? Because if you think that what really matters, what really makes you valuable is power, or image, or prestige, or wealth, or influence, you're never going to be able to rest. You're never going to know peace. Your identity will only ever be as secure as your last success, and you'll never know you've done enough or are doing enough to stay ahead.

But when you know that the Son of God became nothing for you. When you know he was shut out to bring you in; when you know he became poor to make you rich, you'll know a deep peace - from striving to please God, and from striving to please others. But it'll also mean that you're willing to associate and serve those who naturally you might think are not as valuable, because you know that's what Christ did for you, and because your own identity and self-worth aren't tied up with having the influential tell you you're ok. You know the King of all Kings approves of you, so you'll be willing, and happy, to associate with those who have no influence.

And finally, when you know Christ gave up his comfort and was marginalised for you, you'll be willing to experience a bit of discomfort for him. That might mean his generosity moves you to be generous - in a way that costs you. It might mean you being willing to talk to someone about Christ or invite them to a Christmas service, even if you risk being given 'the cold shoulder'.

Whatever it means, this Advent, see the Son of God, laying aside his crown, humbling himself to an animal feeding trough, and experience the peace and security that comes with knowing he did it for you.