

Christmas Morning 2011
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-7

When the Queen goes on a visit somewhere, people plan it months in advance and everything has to be just right. Everywhere's dusted and vacuumed, and cleaned. And when she comes for dinner, the best silver knives and forks comes out and if all of us were invited, your mum would have to wear her best dress, and Mark would have to brush his hair for the first time in his life, and Nix would wear a lovely big hat.

So if those are the efforts people go to for the Queen, what kind of preparations would people have to put in place if God himself were to come and visit us?

Well, what Christmas tells us is that God has done just that. And over the weeks of Advent we've been looking at some of the Old Testament prophecies that predicted that God would send his Messiah, Jesus, to rescue his people. And each prophecy, like the next piece in the jigsaw puzzle, made the picture of who this Messiah would be, just a bit clearer.

When we looked at Isaiah chapter 7, we saw how a virgin would give birth to a son, and he would be Immanuel, which means God with us. Then we saw in Micah chapter 5, how God would raise up a new Ruler, who would be a Shepherd-King, and the sign that this was happening would be when a woman gave birth in Bethlehem. And then this morning, from Isaiah 9, we saw another piece of the jigsaw fall into place, when Isaiah told us that to us a child is born, to us a son is given and this son will be called, wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace. So all these prophecies build up to tell us a baby is going to be born in Bethlehem, and he will be God come as a human, and when he comes, the tide of history will turn.

So if everything has to be just so right for a visit by the Queen, what kind of preparations would have to be made for a visit from Heaven, for the arrival of God's own son? And yet, when all these prophecies came to be fulfilled, and hundreds of years of planning came to their climax, Jesus, Immanuel God with us, the Ruler arising in Bethlehem, the wonderful counselor and mighty God, was born, in a stable, because there wasn't any room at the inn. And in place of a comfy cot he was put in a feeding trough, and in place of film stars and red carpets, there was straw and manure and animals and farm workers.

Now what is God trying to teach us through that? Because if he plans everything else out, you can bet He didn't just forget to book the hotel room. What was he, what is he trying to teach us through the amazingly humble birth of this King Jesus?

Well, firstly, in 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul tells us that what God is trying to teach us is that by Jesus becoming poor, we can become rich. Now, that's not the riches of presidents and royalty, but rather, by coming to Christ with faith, and trusting him and giving our lives to him and welcoming him as our king, we who are poor might experience the riches of God's grace and love and mercy and forgiveness. And if you've never experienced that before – what better time than Christmas to receive God's gift of life for the first time?

But secondly, in Philippians 2, the apostle Paul says what God's trying to teach us is humility. That as we consider how Jesus humbled himself to come as a man, so we would humble ourselves. And that's not just before God, but before each other: that we would count others more significant than ourselves, giving them more honour than us; not letting selfishness or pride be our guide, but looking out for the interests of others. Rather than being self-focused and self-absorbed, we'd be genuinely interested in the lives of others before our own. That as we see how Jesus humbled himself for us, we'd have that kind of attitude to others.

Now I don't know about you, but I might be able to manage that for one day, but not a whole year. And certainly not a whole life. I mean this peace on earth, and good will to all men stuff is all well and good, you might say, but you don't have my pesky brothers and sisters, or my husband who leaves his shoes everywhere. And you certainly don't have my in-laws coming to stay. This honouring, and preferring and watching out for others above ourselves is great, but where can I get the power to live that kind of life from – especially when people wind me up the wrong way? Because I just don't have it in me, and sometimes I'm not even sure I want to.

Well, Paul says that not only is Jesus our example, he is also our power. In Philippians 2:13, having told us how our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus, who humbled himself, and came as a servant for us, Paul says that it is God who works in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Now, we've got to work that out in our lives, but Paul says that God will give us the both the desire and the ability to do what pleases him. So if God takes pleasure in our living for others and preferring others, and counting others more significant than ourselves, just as Christ did for us, then what he asks us to do he gives us the power to do.

So, when we are tempted to push ourselves forward or assert ourselves over others or to dismiss others as not being worth it; or when we get frustrated with our families and want things to be the way we want, and we don't want our sister or brother to have the first turn or the first choice, and we don't feel like honouring the mother in law. Then Jesus, God with us, humbling himself for us, even to the point of death, is our example. And that same Jesus, now risen from the dead and reigning in glory, gives us the power to walk in his footsteps, by the Holy Spirit, who he gives to live in us.

So, as you enjoy the rest of today and this holiday season, make Jesus your example, and go to him for the grace and the power, to live it.