

## **A Sermon for Christmas Day, by the Revd Andrew Hurst, Curate Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2: 1-14**

Apparently, one of the most common sleeping dream that people share is to dream they are having tea with the Queen. In 1982 there was a national stir, when a man called Michael Ryan put our shared national sub-conscious into reality. He scaled the walls of Buckingham Palace, and found his way to the Queen's bedroom just in time for her morning cup of tea. The story goes that they had a chat. Although we shall never know what they talked about and for how long, in a recent Netflix production, "The Crown" the episode was dramatised. (Apparently the real Michael Ryan was a bit miffed, because he said that he is much better looking than the actor who played him. Well, there you go...)

In the dramatised version the whole, somewhat surreal scene is played out. The Queen is sitting up in bed in her Palace bedroom, and Michael Ryan, portrayed as unemployed and seriously struggling with his personal life, is sitting near her in a chair. When the Queen asks him where he comes from, he tells her about a Housing Estate somewhere pretty rough and deprived in south London. The Queen makes a very polite but inadequate reply.

There is the gulf: Queen / Michael; Michael/Queen. It is the inevitability of wealth in the face of poverty. Despite all the abundant qualities that our Sovereign Queen Elizabeth has, despite all her qualities of duty, compassion, empathy and mutual respect, no mortal Queen or King on this earth can really know the other side.

Unto us is born this day *our* King. Isaiah foretells that the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light - for a child has been born for us, a Son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is the Kingdom of God, everlasting, for ever more. Unto us is born our King, Jesus Christ.

But who is our King? Was our King born behind high walls and ornate gates? Was our King guarded by soldiers and Press Officers? Did our King grow up with estates, honours and riches? Was our King the subject of deference wherever He went? Did He command unconditional loyalty, loyalty unto death? Did our King have a flag, a carriage and trotting cavalry?

Our King was born in hard times, to an exhausted young mother and an anxious father. He would become, before he was many days, old a refugee, fleeing from Herod with his parents into exile in Egypt. Our King knew the kindness of strangers who did what they could, of the night workers in the hills who came to do homage. There were no Ambassadors, or Heads of State; but there were the shepherds. Our King would grow up anonymously, a Carpenter's Son in Nazareth, living humbly in the world, growing up to his ministry that led to rejection, betrayal, abandonment and death.

In what strange glory then, comes our King.

And what of the Kingdom of our King? It is all very well, it might be said, for if there is a King, then surely there is a Kingdom? In a Kingdom I can expect to see roads, villages and cities; there should be coinage with the King's head on it; there are minerals and forests and rivers; there is an Army and a Police force. I expect to see a territory, with a border drawn on a map. Here is where the King's writ runs. There is a flag and a Passport. If you want to visit, you may need a visa - you may need *permission to enter and not be allowed to overstay your welcome*.

We can imagine a rather haughty courtier, or competitive diplomat saying, so show me this Kingdom of which you speak. It is not somewhere on a map? It has no flag? It has no currency? What sort of a Kingdom is this Kingdom of the Prince of Peace?

Well, to be honest, sometimes it can look pretty bleak, now you come to mention it. Sometimes it looks rather tatty, rather failing. On an impossibly wet and soaking Tuesday afternoon this week in town, there was variously a man yelling an obscenity at a lady who had the temerity to cross Trinity Street and not notice him on his bicycle; there was a lady screaming at the staff outside the Apple Shop in the Grand Arcade, there was a group of young people who clearly (to the professional eye) shared a major class A drug addiction, and there was all manner of casual swearing by self-absorbed, impatient customers in John Lewis (yes, John Lewis - who would have thought it?). And I came home in the gloom where the day had never got light, soaking wet, and found out we are in Tier 4 from Boxing Day. So in those moments, with apologies to Louis Armstrong, I did not think to myself what a wonderful world. I was rather cross with it all. It was not so much the season of goodwill, but the season of stress and selfishness. It didn't feel much like a Kingdom.

Yet still, in what strange glory comes our King to the world.

It *is* glory because God's Kingdom is perfect in its genius and its genesis. It is glory **precisely** because it comes into being for us, not in a Palace with flunkies and Obstetricians, but in a world of the outside: a world far from the gates of a Palace. It could be born in a corner of the Grand Arcade, where the outside finds some inside. God's Kingdom is precisely here - all around.

It is a Kingdom that is born not into privilege but into imperfection, pain and loss.

It is the Kingdom where the yoke of burden is taken, and the rod of oppression lifted; it is the Kingdom that brings the love of God to all the world in all its imperfections. The light shines though the darkness of uncertainty, apprehension, loneliness, illness, grief and loss. So when, as now, the world is dark God's Kingdom is indeed as prophesied by Isaiah.

This Kingdom is the Kingdom of perfect love, of light in the darkness, of being held by the right hand through all that life throws at us; it is the peace beyond all understanding; it is the still, small voice of calm; it is in the love for the outcast and excluded, in the universal love for the wealthy and for the poor. It is in the love that lays down its life for its friends, the love that never fails. And it all began with a newborn baby, in some ramshackle make-do outhouse, in a crowded and indifferent world, with local society's unlikeliest of guests: the light of the world. That is why in these dark times we know with confidence that there will again be singing, and joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

A newborn baby is a thing of wonder. (It is the tiny fingernails that always get me.) This tiny new life, to be held in cradled palms. Two thousand years ago, Joseph of Nazareth held the baby Jesus in his hands, in his open palms, tiny fingernails and all: God among us, God who will teach us and change us, God who will be abandoned, suffer and die and rise again. He held this Jesus Christ who takes away the sins of the world, and grants us peace.

So when the proud inhabitant of a great and glorious realm asks haughtily, where is this Kingdom of which you speak, and demands to be shown it set out on a map, we have no need for a map. We say, here - look here, here in our hands. Because as surely as Joseph cradled the baby Jesus, we too, shortly as we receive communion, will cradle in our hands the Kingdom of Heaven. No maps, no borders, no visas required; and its currency is universal love.

This Kingdom is as small and as enormous as our Communion wafer, that begins with Christmas. It is the universal universe cradled here, in our outstretched hands: the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen