

Luke opens his story of Jesus' birth with a magisterial proclamation worthy of a herald announcing the arrival of a King or Emperor. This is because it was modelled on exactly such an imperial proclamation, that of Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the world.

The place in history is marked; the geographic location is made clear. Here is a world event in the making. John Simpson is to be sent immediately to cover the story. All we need are trumpets to play a fanfare; and behold, we have an angelic choir, announcing that here is a king and someone more than a king. The heavenly throng shows that this is a super-terrestrial, a cosmic event, beyond the limits of space and time, while somehow within those, so carefully recorded, bounds.

So now we need a palace for the birth of the king, silk cushions, golden candelabra, a dozen flunkies in courtly attire to bow and scrape in flunky fashion; and maybe some ambassadors from distant lands to acknowledge the power and majesty of the new-born king.

What we get, in Luke's telling of the story, after the magisterial prelude, is a stable; or perhaps just a normal dwelling where the animals would share the night-space, to provide heat for the human inhabitants. And a manger, the feeding trough for the beasts. And a stream of disreputables to gawp at a swaddled child a-bed in the straw.

This is Kingship Jesus' style. Here we have a vivid, memorable tableau which depicts the teaching he will pronounce in word and in act throughout his ministry until his death, between two thieves; when he will graciously grant entry into his Kingdom to one of his disreputable companions in kingly style.

He came into the world with nothing except the love of Mary and Joseph. They were far from home and his first resting-place was borrowed, and probably the swaddling around his tiny body too. As a grown up the Son of Man will have no where to lay his head (Lk.9,58) and will be dependent on the charity of women who accompany him and his motley band (Lk.8, 1-4). He silences an argument among the twelve about who was the greatest by setting a little child in their midst, and telling them "The least among you all is the one who is the greatest" (Lk. 9,48).

He will tell them that if they wish to be first they must be the servant to all. He himself has come among them as one who serves (Lk.22, 24-27) For those now last will be first and those now first who will be last (Lk.13,30). Those who raise themselves up will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Lk 14,11).

All of which has already been announced by Mary in her song of praise where she proclaimed the glory of God who "casts down the mighty from their thrones and

raises the lowly” (Lk 1,53).

Jesus comes among his people, the fullness of God's Revelation; and he comes in poverty, in humility; God in cast off clothing.

If you ask a philosopher what God would be like in order to be God, they will answer in terms of superlatives. God must be One and so be utterly simple; God must be all-powerful; supreme, absolutely absolute; perfect, eternal. When God appears among us as one like us in all things but sin, we see a baby; an infant powerless, dependent, fragile; as far from the God of philosophers as anyone might imagine. As a man he will be poor, living on charity; and he will die the death of the poorest wretch, alongside criminals. This is the long awaited Good News.

If we take Jesus seriously we need to rethink how we understand God.

One of the few people who have taken Jesus at his word was Francis of Assisi, the little poor man who is credited with producing the first crib as a visual aid for the poor. So closely was Francis seen as another Christ that if you ask in Assisi to see where he was born you will be shown a stable. Francis embraced poverty; and helped transformed the Church of his age. Francis understood that God, who is present everywhere is most clearly experienced in the poor, the marginalised, the desperate; and in those who give everything away, as God has done in Christ to share in our lowly human condition, in order to receive everything. As Francis sang:

“It is in giving to all that we receive and in dying that we are born to eternal life.”
Now that is a magisterial proclamation.