

O Little Town... – Micah 5:2-5

A young father went shopping on Christmas Eve. As with many fathers or husbands, he had only one present to buy – his wife had taken care of all the other present buying, along with the food shopping, the decorations and all the rest of it.

But he wanted to do his part, so he ventured out to the shops on Christmas Eve, and in a moment of festive joy, he decided to take his three year old daughter, Sophie, with him.

They arrived at the shops, and by some minor miracle, found a parking space only a ten minute walk away. So father and daughter arrived hand in hand to this festive wonderland. Carols were blaring, everything was busy, and little Sophie was awestruck.

Wow.

He urged her on.

“Look Daddy! That’s the biggest Christmas tree in the world!”

“Yes, it’s great, isn’t?”

“It’s even bigger than the one at Grandma’s house”

“Yes, even bigger than Grandma’s. Let’s get to the jewellery shop...”

They moved further into the shopping centre, they turned a corner, and sure enough:

“Daddy! Look! It’s Santa Claus”

“Yes, Sophie, let’s go to the shop...”

“Daddy! Is that the real Santa Claus?”

“Ooh. I don’t know... it might be one of his helpers.”

“Because the real Santa Claus should be at the north pole, shouldn’t he, Daddy?”

“That’s right, Sophie, he needs to be making toys. Let’s go to the shop,”

“Daddy, that’s silly: Santa doesn’t make the toys, the elves do.”

“Yes, Sophie, I’d forgotten the elves.” He looked at his watch.

“Santa needs to feed the reindeer, Daddy, and load the sleigh.”

“That’s right Sophie, and he needs to have his dinner”

Little Sophie put her hands on her hips and sighed at her father.

“He doesn’t need dinner, because we leave food out for him. Milk and biscuits”

“Or a beer?”

“Daddy, Santa doesn’t drink beer if he’s driving his sleigh.”

And so it went on. Eventually they went further into the shopping centre. Tantalisingly close to the jewellery shop that he was aiming for...

And then they saw it... the nativity scene.

"Daddy! Look at the shepherds!"

"Yes, let's go"

"And the wise men, Daddy! Look at them!"

"Yes"

"And Mary and Joseph!"

Yes

"And look Daddy, there's a sheep too! Look how white and fluffy it is!"

Yes.

And then she was quiet. She reached out her hand and pointed.

"Look Daddy. Baby Jesus asleep on the hay"

With a glance at his watch he reached down picked her up his arms and strode on.

"We don't have time for this," he said, "We've got to get ready for Christmas"

It's one of the constant ideas that we have in the modern church, that Jesus gets pushed out of the picture at Christmas time. There's so much going on, so many distractions. People don't have time for Jesus.

But if you think about it, in many ways, it's not a surprise.

Which is the least significant figure in a nativity scene?

It's not the shepherds.

And certainly not the wise men either.

Mary, and to a lesser extent Joseph are prominent at the front.

Which just leaves Jesus.

And yet, this insignificant figure. This defenceless baby, is the centre of the Christmas story.

And not just of the Christmas story, but the story of the whole world.

When God sent his Son into creation to save us all, he didn't come in riding on a white horse, he didn't come with majesty and grandeur.

He came as the least significant figure in the scene.

And indeed, the scene itself took place in a pretty insignificant place.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,” says the prophet Micah in today’s reading.

At the time of Jesus birth, Bethlehem’s population at the time is estimated to be about 150, it was sort of a satellite town of Jerusalem. It had no crossroads, no industries, no notable resources. Back in the prophet Nehemiah’s time, it was even left out of the list of the cities of Judah.

Bethlehem was a quiet, shepherding community, but it did have some significant history: Jacob’s wife, Rachel is buried there (Genesis 35:16-19), Ruth was redeemed there (Ruth 4:10-11), David, the greatest king in Israel’s history was born and anointed there.

Like the figure of Jesus in the Nativity scene, Bethlehem was small and insignificant, but it was also incredibly important.

While the carol “Once is Royal David’s city” is right in what it says, we can easily get the impression from that carol that Bethlehem at the time was a grand and bustling place.

“O little town of Bethlehem” by contrast is not so grand: Bethlehem was a quiet place. There may have been a few more than usual there for the census, but then again, some of the locals may well have left town to go to their places of birth too.

So just like the figure of Jesus in the nativity scene is overshadowed by the other characters. Bethlehem would have been overshadowed by Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the centre of the Jewish world. Jerusalem was important.

But God chose Bethlehem.

And Micah says of Bethlehem “out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.””

God chose Bethlehem. The little town. The insignificant town.

And time and time again, as we read the scriptures, we see that’s how God works. Working through the places – and even more through the people – who are insignificant – or at least insignificant in the world’s terms.

Samuel was just a boy when God called him.

David was a shepherd boy, who grew up to become the greatest king ancient Israel ever had.

Joseph was just a carpenter. Mary was just a girl.

Jesus’ first disciples weren’t rabbis. They were fishermen.

And yet, God worked through them all.

In fact, Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians (1:27-28) "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong"

God works through the small, and the weak, and the insignificant.

When Micah prophesies, though, he tells us far more than where the saviour is to be born.

He tells us what the saviour will do: "Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." (5:3-4a)

The one who is to come will be a shepherd – though not of sheep. His ancestor David was a shepherd too: While David's brothers were off fighting Philistines and earning themselves military honours, David was protecting helpless sheep, and he was risking his life doing it – fighting and killing lions and bears.

Micah tells us that the saviour will do this in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. The saviour (the Messiah/Christ) cannot be separated from God; because whatever the saviour does, is what God wants him to do... and whatever he does, he does with the authority of God.

And that remains true today.

We are Jesus' flock – we need him to be our shepherd. We can't truly survive without him. It would be a brave but foolish sheep who said to the shepherd, "no thanks, I think I'll take care of this bear on my own."

And similarly, we are pretty foolish if we think that we can handle all the problems of the world and our lives on our own. But we can turn to Jesus, the good shepherd. The good shepherd, who we know, has laid down his life for his sheep.

Jesus is from humble beginnings, and he's a shepherd. But Micah says that he's also something else:

The end of verse 4 says, "And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth."

They will live securely. It seems that security is very important to us these days. Security checks have become more frequent and more thorough. People want our government to do everything it can to secure our borders. And our public spaces. But as we see all too often, we can never have perfect security. We can never be completely safe. People make mistakes, people can't possibly know everything that's going on.

Over the last few years we've seen what happens when the securities we enjoy fail: When bushfires wipe out towns. Or when swollen rivers flood them. When our state borders are shut, and international travel not permitted. When our schools and workplaces are closed. It's been a reminder of how tenuous the security we have really is.

But Jesus brings us true security. Not worldly security - but everlasting security. Paul writes that nothing can separate us from God's love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation. (Romans 8:38-39)

Bad things can still happen to us, of course, and bad things will happen. But they shouldn't distract us from God. Peter puts it like this: "[God has given us through Jesus] an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." (1 Peter 1:4)

And Jesus himself says, as we heard a few weeks ago, that "when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed..." (Mark 13:7)

The security that the saviour brings is not just for the nation of Israel, but for the whole of the earth. Time and time again, the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, became arrogant in their privilege. They thought that being God's chosen people meant that they were God's only people. But we can go right back to the promises to Abraham in Genesis to see that's not right. Genesis 12: "I will make of you a great nation... and through you I will bless all the nations".

Importantly for us, it is through the saviour that all nations will be blessed. It is not that all nations and peoples are worthy, but through the grace of Christ. As Jesus says in John's gospel (Jn 14:6) "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father, except through me."

So Micah says "And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth." And finally, at the beginning of verse 5, "and he will be our peace".

The security and peace that Jesus gives us isn't through the force of arms, and our modern image of security and peacemaking and peacekeeping, is almost always of soldiers and police and security forces, decked out in helmets and body armour and balaclavas, and carrying guns and tasers and teargas... or worse.

Security by force can seem reassuring... but our experience is that it's doomed to failure. We can't police everyone, and even if we could, who will police the police?

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" Corinthians (1:27-28)

When God intervened in history, it wasn't by force of arms. When the prince of peace came into the world, he wasn't carrying a colt .45 in one hand and a big stick in the other.

When the prince of peace came into the world he was a baby. And insignificant baby. Born to insignificant parents from an insignificant town. In an insignificant town. But the little town of Bethlehem.

While the baby born in Bethlehem was insignificant in many ways, he was also special. And Bethlehem was insignificant too, but it was also special.

And so it is with us. We may feel insignificant. We probably are insignificant at least some of the time. But we are also special because God loves us. So special that God sent his son to save us. Not just to visit us, but to become one of us.

As Mary said in our reading from Luke, and which we remember in the hymn 'Tell out my soul': "Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight, the hungry fed, the humble lifted high."

When it all seems too much for us, when life is overwhelming, when we feel that we are insignificant, we need to remember that God will work through us anyway. God will lift us high – not because of anything we do, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

The insignificant baby. Born to insignificant parents from an insignificant town, in an insignificant town. In an insignificant Roman province. Became the most important person in history, not by chance, but through God's plan and God's grace. In his life and death and resurrection Jesus gave us the right to become the children of God. If we just turn to him, and put our trust in him.

And so again today, as people have for thousands of years, we hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell, O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.

Amen.