In a few minutes time, before we take Communion, we will say together the Lord’s Prayer, which ends with the words, ‘The kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen’. The great declaration that unites us as Christians, that we live under the authority of God, the sovereignty of Christ in the world.

And how was that power and that glory first revealed? According to Luke, the proof is this: “You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” Glory and authority and power revealed through vulnerability, fragility and humility.

It’s a strange way to show power: that’s not the way of the world, is it? And Luke knows that – and wants to teach us something very profound through his version of the Christmas story as he compares the power systems of the world with the power system of the Kingdom of God.

When Luke begins his account of the birth of Jesus, he starts by telling us of the census which the Roman Emperor had ordered. Verse 1: “At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire”. The Roman Census was a real hassle: you had to uproot and go on a long arduous journey, back to the place of your birth. It would have cost time and money. And what did you get at the end of it? A Tax Return from the Roman Inland Revenue!

People did not like the Census. There were often riots and, occasionally, people were killed. People did not like the Census because the Census made one fact absolutely clear…The Romans were in control.

So the Census was actually a profound symbol of political authority. The politicians were in charge. The Emperor Augustus was in control - and if the politicians said ‘Jump’, everyone had to jump…

The story of the birth of Jesus is set in the context of oppressive and overwhelming political power; a power system so strong that the people of Israel felt completely disempowered.

Perhaps we might have reason to sympathise with that tonight. As we look back at world events in 2014, we see the danger of tyranny and political oppression. And just as the Nativity story is set in Bethlehem, so another year has gone by with Palestinian and Israeli struggle. Just as the Nativity story is set in the Middle East, so we have witnessed the unrest and agony of terror and war in the Middle East. Just as this Nativity story mentions the oppressive regime of Quirinius in Syria, so, we continue to read of bloodshed and oppressive dictatorship in that country.

In Bethlehem, in Syria, in the Middle East tonight, the political pain of oppressive political power is just as real tonight as it was for Mary and Joseph.

And for many of us too, the politics of power have impacted us through 2014. In the face of all the power-play and decision-making of British politics, we might feel disempowered and disenchanted.

That is the context in which we live today. That is the context into which Christ was born.

So, in the first part of our reading, Luke emphasises the strength of political power. He mentions Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria. We are left in no doubt as to where the earthly power lies.

But then the scene changes, in verse 8: “There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields.” We move from the ultimate power of the Emperor Augustus to the ultimate powerlessness of the poor and humble shepherds in the field. And God is beginning to signal something new here about the true values of the world that cannot possibly be embodied in any political system, either in the 1st-century or in the 21st-century.

There are three pointers that this Christmas story gives us about Kingdom values

**1. God chose the shepherds to be his witnesses**

Shepherds lived on the margins. They were generally distrusted and despised; so much so that they weren’t even allowed to be witnesses in the courts of law. How strange, then, that God should choose shepherds to be the first witnesses to the birth of the Messiah. The Emperor is by-passed. The Roman politicians are by-passed. Quirinius, governor of Syria is by-passed. But God chooses the shepherds.

These were the ordinary folk in society: blue collar workers who, to be honest, were largely ignored as they went about their everyday work. But God did not disregard them: God regarded them. God chose them, the ordinary folk, to be witnesses to his glory.

And so it is the way of God, to reveal himself to those who feel disempowered and disregarded, to reveal himself to those people who might believe they have the least to give.

And that is why Christmas is such Good News for all of us who feel disempowered and disregarded, for all of us who carry burdens and fears and anxieties and hurts from the past. Because it is to such as us that God reveals his glory.

Later in his ministry, Jesus said: “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest”. That ministry of bringing healing and salvation to the weary began this Christmas night, when the glory of the Lord shone over the shepherds with the visitation of Good News from the angels.

**2. God revealed himself in the form of a vulnerable and fragile child**

We all know how vulnerable and fragile babies and children can be. And so it is an incredible truth that God Almighty, King of the Universe, should choose to show his power and authority by taking the form of a vulnerable child. People often say, “Christmas is for the children” - and they are right, if we are prepared to become children again. Jesus said to Nicodemus that if he was to know God, he had to be born again. Jesus said to his disciples, “Let the children come to me. To such as these belong the Kingdom of God”.

The message of the Nativity is that we need to become children again. We need to recover child-like qualities so that we can be struck afresh with the awe and wonder of the Christian message.

And child-like qualities begin, I believe, in recovering the skill of dependence. We need to recover the skill of dependence so that we can depend on God solely for our joy and our salvation.

The problem is that we are too old to experience the joy and wonder of Christmas. We have grown too cynical, too self-reliant, to stop and look into a simple crib and gaze adoringly at a little baby who has become our salvation.

But Christ is our salvation - and in the midst of the uncertainty of this world, at this deeply traumatic period in history, we need to learn to depend on God again for our wisdom and our way forward.

First, then, God chose the humble shepherds to witness his glory.

Second, God chose a humble baby to reveal his glory.

Third, and finally, God chose humble clothing to display his glory.

**3. God in Christ did not wear royal robes but strips of cloth**

What humility is signified in this: our Lord Jesus Christ, who has ultimate power and authority is clothed not in royal robes, but in strips of cloth.

It’s no coincidence, that there are only two times in the life of Jesus when he is wrapped in strips of cloth. The first is here in Luke 2:7: “Mary gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger.” The second time is in John 19:40 after the crucifixion: “Taking Jesus’ body, the two [disciples] wrapped it in strips of cloth [and laid him in the tomb]”.

Jesus began life in strips of cloth in a manger. Jesus ended life in strips of cloth in a tomb.

From manger to tomb, Jesus exhibited royal power not through force, but in acts of love and compassion.

From manger to tomb, Jesus showed us that authority is not to be grasped, but is worked out through service and through love.

Whatever else you remember from this Christmas, remember the strips of cloth in the manger and the strips of cloth in the tomb - and remember the power of love exhibited through humility and service and seek to emulate that way of living in your life.

So in this Nativity story, we find three very important truths about the values of the Kingdom of God. First, the glory of God is witnessed by the humble and poor in spirit – the shepherds. Second, the glory of God is revealed in humble human form – the baby Jesus. Third, the glory of God is displayed in humble clothing – the strips of cloth.

Quirinius may have been a power hungry Governor of Syria. The Roman Empire may have had a political stranglehold on the region. But this Christmas night – the true Lord and Saviour has been born among us; not wielding might and weapons of war, not with the power of an earthly Kingdom, not wearing royal robes fit for an earthly king. Our Lord and Saviour chooses this night to show us a different way, a better way for the world and for ourselves. Humility, compassion, frailty and vulnerability. These are the attitudes of heart which reveal the values of the Kingdom of God.

If you are feeling humbled tonight, the Kingdom of God is near to you.

If you are in need of compassion tonight, the Kingdom of God is near to you.

If you are feeling frail tonight, the Kingdom of God is near to you.

If you are feeling vulnerable tonight, the Kingdom of God is near to you.

The Kingdom of God is near to you. It has been revealed through this little baby, wrapped in strips of cloth - our Lord, our Saviour.

In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I have come that you may have life in all its fullness”. The invitation is there for each one of us tonight…

Let’s meet with Jesus tonight, let the dear Christ-child enter in, so that we may have a new start this Christmas and know what it means to have life in all its fullness.