

The letter that came over my desk was totally unexpected: "You are hereby advised that the Jesus, the Son of God, will be visiting your town this year on December the 25th." The Son of God?! What an honour! As Mayor, my mind went into overdrive. Invitations had to be sent to all the people who mattered: the Premier, the Prime Minister - no, he'll be out of the country. It'll have to be his deputy - and don't forget the bishops and religious leaders. And then there's the advertising - got to have a big crowd!.....So much to organise in so little time!

But organise I did, and come the day, all was prepared. We dignitaries gathered on a huge dais festooned with bunting, ready to bask in his glory. The town brass band was there, having practiced diligently for the occasion. Our speeches were prepared, agonised over and word perfect. To top it off we had organised a sky show, spectacular fireworks to light up the sky and impress our guest - a display fit for a king. A good crowd had gathered, and all was in readiness.

The appointed time came - and went. Our guest didn't show. We waited.....and waited.

Finally I reluctantly went to the microphone to apologise.

Before I could speak, there came a voice from the back of the crowd. "Excuse me, sir. I know where he is."

I managed to make him out through a sea of faces. "And who might you be?"

"I'm a shepherd from the hill country, out there." He waved vaguely in the direction of 'out there'.

"And you say you know where our guest is?"

"Yes. I've seen him. I can take you to him, if you like."

I turned to my fellow dignitaries and said, "Should we trust him?" The Premier said, "He looks awfully scruffy." The Bishop said, "He'll probably take us to the cathedral. If he's anywhere, it has to be there."

So we decided that it would do no harm to go with him.

He led us out through the centre of town, past the cathedral (much to the Bishop's surprise) to the suburbs and beyond, and out to the seedy area on the edge of town, where rusty utes and motorbikes littered the front yards. If that wasn't bad enough, he led us down a garbage lined lane to a dilapidated shed.

Beyond the rickety wooden door (we had to duck our heads to enter) it took some time for our eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. When the Bishop fell over a goat we realised that we were in a stable. Some other other shepherds were there, as well as three clearly eminent men, dressed in rich, colourful robes.

I said to one of them, "Why didn't you let us know you were coming? You could have joined us in town, instead of this.....this awful place." He simply smiled, and pointed to the feed box.

We hadn't noticed it before, and we hadn't noticed the young couple sitting behind it. And we certainly hadn't noticed the new-born baby asleep in it.

I was torn between anger and curiosity.....anger that all my careful plans had gone up in smoke and my mayoral reputation was in tatters, and curiosity, because I sensed that there was something important here that needed exploration.

Curiosity won the day. Besides, I was somehow drawn to the child. I crept over to the manger and knelt beside it. I couldn't resist stroking his little face, and when he stirred and wrapped his fingers around my little finger - well, my heart melted.

It was a profoundly life-changing moment, as though I had found what I had always longed for, but never knew.

The others came to the manger one by one. Except the Bishop. He never quite got over the humiliation of falling over the goat, and left in a huff.

Eventually we followed after him. It didn't seem to matter that our shoes were caked with animal poo, or that bits of straw clung to our Armani Suits. The coming of what *we* would recognise as a great king, in pomp and ceremony, seemed to pale into insignificance.

