

Luke 2:1-20

Luke 2:1-20 juxtaposes two geopolitical extremes: the might and prominence of the Roman emperor, and the humility and modesty of the Christ-child. This is the sub-text of the entire passage, two emperors and two realities: one powerful, prestigious and far-reaching; the other embryonic, frail, and provincial.

Day One: Luke 2:1-2 The Caesar

¹*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)*

Born Octavian, and a distant relative of Julius Caesar, he was later adopted as the son and heir of the emperor. Augustus ascended the throne in 27BCE. He was accorded the status and titles of a demi-god; as one laudatory inscription reads, “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”

So even such a passing reference, raises a question in the mind of an ancient reader: Who is the real divine, son of god, savior and Lord? The emperor who rules the world? Or the peasant baby born in a stable?

It is a lesson to us, especially to God’s people under repressive political or religious regimes – or even to Christians in America alarmed when a president of the other political party takes office – that the balance of power is not always as it seems to the naked eye.

Day Two: Luke 2:3-4 The Census

³*And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.*

A population census served two goals: taxation and military service. The Jews were exempt from the latter, but not from the former. A census forcibly drove home that Israel was an occupied land, oppressed by infidels. Opponents characterized taxation by a foreign power as slavery. Due to the political and religious overtones – and also to the

monies involved – census-taking was volatile: a census in AD6 led to a massive uprising among Jews in Palestine (see Acts 5:37).

Caesar Augustus acted without regard to God, and in oppression of God's people, but all the while unintentionally fulfilling God's purposes. Centuries earlier God had declared: ""But you, Bethlehem ... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2). So the self-interested acts of an oppressive, godless regime furthered God's purpose.

And this is true not just at Jesus' birth, but also at his death: "Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27-28). In crucifying Jesus, Roman and Jewish leaders furthered God's purposes in salvation.

Are you deeply worried about some adverse event in the world, or in your private life? Luke 2:1-4 is a reminder of the sovereignty of God, that nothing can happen to his people – even oppression at the hands of political and military authorities – that he will not use to accomplish his purpose.

Day Three: Luke 2:6-7 The Stable

⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The Roman son of god, savior and lord – the emperor Augustus – lived in a palace, plied with luxuries, with innumerable servants to wait on him. The Jewish son of God, savior and lord, was born in a stable, among animals, and laid in a feed trough. The elite of our world – and even we ourselves – come wrapped in all the luxury that we can afford or charge to credit cards. The son of God comes swaddled in poverty.

Primarily, this is grounds for worship, that Christ, though in nature God, made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, made in human likeness (Phil 2:7). Secondarily, it is a reminder of how we should live:

“Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich,” therefore, “see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Cor 8:9,7).

Day Four: Luke 2:8-14 The Angels

¹⁰*The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

¹³*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

The angels provide a heavenly perspective on earthly reality. From a human perspective, the powerful Roman emperor was ‘savior’ and ‘Lord’; his birth and victories in battle constituted ‘good news’; he ruled ‘all the people’; his reign brought ‘peace’ to the world: all these affirmations appear in Roman political and religious culture.

Luke takes these same terms and ideas, from the Old Testament prophets – particularly Isaiah – to affirm them of Jesus. He, not Augustus, is savior, lord, messiah; his birth and his victory over sin and death are good news; he comes to rule all the people in peace. The newborn baby – not the powerful emperor – reigns supreme and beneficent. Glory to God, not to the emperor! Salvation comes not to the politically powerful, but to those whom this God favors. This is grounds for worship: that God favored you, without any compelling reason, but solely by his gratuity.

Day Five: Luke 2:8-20 The Shepherds

Luke’s selection of this account for his narrative is notable. Two points are germane about shepherding as a vocation. For one, shepherding had noble associations: Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds; the temple sacrificial system depended on a steady supply of sheep; and, the profession served as a metaphor for God’s care of his people, and for church leadership. Still, shepherds are peasants, engaged in manual labor, watching flocks overnight and out in the fields, at the lower levels of power and prestige.

Yet it is they – and not the social, political or religious elite – whom God blesses with angelic visitation, and the announcement of salvation. It is they who serve as first witnesses to the birth of the coming savior, messiah, and lord. For no special reason apart from God's grace and his concern for 'little people'. Mary herself noted, "[God] has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (1:52).

So this is an opportune time to reflect on our own vocations or vocational ambitions. Are we among the elite? or the non-elite? Among the professional – or among the working – class? Are we getting our status and gaining fulfillment now, or is it being reserved for us in heaven? And if we are among the elite in this life, what can we do to ensure that our role is not reversed in the next life?

Day Six: Luke 2:19 The Parents Mother

¹⁹*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

Notably, especially in a patriarchal society, throughout the entire birth narrative, Mary receives greater attention than Joseph. The angel came first to her (2:26-38), not to Joseph. She is credited with a song of praise (2:46-56), while Joseph is off-stage and silent. Even Zechariah – also credited with a song of praise – receives more narrative attention than Joseph. All Joseph does is to transport Mary to Bethlehem (2:4); she gives birth, she swaddles the baby, and she lays him in a manger (2:7). And she – not they – mulled all these things over in her heart.

This is consistent with Luke's emphasis throughout his gospel on the disenfranchised: the poor, the lame, the ill, the sinful, the gentile, and the female... It is consistent also with the main thrust of Christian ethic: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3;28). While the New Testament may not revoke all gender-based role distinctions, it elevates the status of women to a degree largely unprecedented in the ancient world. Of course, none of this justifies praying to Mary, claiming her to be sinless, or considering her co-redeemer alongside Christ. Still, she has a special status in her own right: "From now on all generations will call be blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me" (1:48-49). And through her, God elevates the status of her entire gender.