



BISHOP'S LETTER

Christmas 2021

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Luke 2:1-7

My dear ANiC friends,

I'm reminded while reading this passage from Luke that I always kind of liked the name "Quirinius" (though, sadly, I missed the opportunity when our children were born to assign it to either of them!).

And I realize, as long as I can remember I've known that this famous decree of Caesar's which went out for a census of the known world—the census which moved Joseph and Mary all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem—happened during the time when this Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Clearly, Luke was very concerned with accuracy in historical events and wanted us to know that the birth of Jesus, born of a Virgin Mary, as announced in Luke chapter 1, was a real event in history, while real known people in history, like Quirinius, were in office.

It was not an easy time in history for people like Joseph and Mary, who were poor and vulnerable. Living as subjects of a foreign oppressor made decrees and requirements stressful, to say the least. And, as arbitrary and

ridiculous as having to travel back to one's hometown of your family line just so you could be registered and pay more taxes to Rome, they just had to do it and they did.

It was certainly not a convenient time. The day when Mary was likely to give birth to the very Son of God was almost upon them. Leon Morris, in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, suggests that it is likely there was no legal requirement for Mary to accompany Joseph but that it is very possibly, given all the gossip and rumours that may have been swirling about Mary's pregnancy, Joseph wanted her with him, even though the long trip must have been very difficult.

And then when they finally arrived in Bethlehem and labour had set in for Mary, there was no room for them in the local inn. Mary ended up giving birth to this precious Jesus in a stable and dutifully wrapped him in swaddling cloths—which she must have brought in anticipation of the birth—and then laid him in a manger, where normally hay was kept for the livestock.

You can read Luke's wonderful account, as we did above, of this challenging and extraordinary event in Luke chapter 2. You can also read all about what followed this birth in the rest of the Gospel of Luke (I recommend it as a great read one quiet afternoon this Christmas season.)

I myself hope to preach on Luke 2:8-20 in the coming days. Perhaps one of the many services that may be happening at your congregation, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or December 26th may include this sermon, or perhaps you will decide to listen yourself online when it's released on the ANiC website or the various social media outlets.

But back to Luke 2:1-7. What is very wonderfully clear, is that though there must have been much stress, pain, perhaps confusion, and disappointment around the situation of Jesus' birth, what is also incredibly clear is the Sovereign Lord God had it all looked after.

How wonderful is that! Whatever motivation Caesar Augustus may have had for his tax and registration, God intended it to move Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem because way back in Micah 5:2 God promised:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

This birth had to be in Bethlehem and so God used Caesar Augustus to make it happen; and perhaps even some mean gossipers to assure that Joseph brought Mary with him.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Isaiah 9:6-7

Through Isaiah the prophet, the Lord made it clear that a Son was to be born and given, and this would most certainly happen because the “zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this”. And, sure enough, he did it, in a stable in Bethlehem.

As for me, I find Luke 2:1-7 tremendously encouraging. I am glad that Luke makes it clear that this is real history. I love it that the great ruler of the whole known world and his governors were ultimately just a pons in the hands of the real King of kings and Lord of lords, taking anything and everything as a means of working out his good purposes.

I find it encouraging that though everything about this birth was extraordinary, in another way, it was very normal. Jesus entered this world born of a woman just as you and I were born, and he was wrapped in swaddling cloths just as you and I were cared for in those early hours of our earthly pilgrimage.

***“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,”
Galatians 4:4***

In many ways you and I are living in crazy, uncertain days; as was Jesus born into a crazy, uncertain and hostile environment. But the promises of God held true then and they do now. All the setbacks they faced were no match for the zeal of the Lord.

Just above, I quoted the apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians. “Fullness of time” makes it clear there is nothing arbitrary or haphazard about the way God works or even the timing of when he works. Reading Luke 2:1-7, it may have appeared extremely haphazard and out of control, but not so. The Lord had everything in hand. He always promises to work for good as Paul wrote in another epistle (Romans 8:28).

Be of good cheer, my friend. In these COVID-crazy days, the Lord knows what he’s doing, his promises remain true and he is on top of everything, working for good.

The critical question is: have you received the Lord Jesus, and, if so, you have received his adoption as his children and are securely in a good place.

***“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”
Galatians 4:4-7***

He has everything in hand!

I bring you greetings on behalf of my fellow bishops and our Bishop-Elect Dan, and pray God’s blessing for you and all whom you love this Christmas and throughout the New Year!

Christmas Blessings,



+ Charlie

*The Right Reverend Charlie Masters
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