

Christmas Eve 2016

Isaiah 9:1–6
 Psalm 96:1–3, 11–13
 Titus 2:11–14
 Luke 2:1–18

We have just heard one of the most famous passages in the Bible, Luke chapter 2.

In this passage, we have the theme of Jesus the Warrior who is setting up his kingdom in opposition to the kingdoms of the world. Jesus came as a tiny little baby because he had to slip quietly and clandestinely behind enemy lines. He saw this world as enemy occupied territory. God's desire for the world could not be fully realized because it was in the grip of the powers of violence, hatred, division and spiritual sickness. Jesus comes behind these enemy lines because he comes to fight, not in the ways of the world or with the weapons of the world but he has come to fight nevertheless.

Listen again now to these famous words with this theme of Jesus the Warrior in mind.

*1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.
 2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirini-us was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.*

This story begins the way most poems and stories were introduced in the ancient world. It invokes the names of the powerful. Quirini-us the most powerful man in the region where Jesus was born and the greatest of the them all, Caesar Augustus the king of the world. For an ancient person reading this story they would say, okay it makes sense we are talking about the king of the world.

Here is the great irony. The story isn't about him at all. It's about this couple making their way from one dusty corner and Caesar's far flung empire to the place where Joseph's family originated. They are going there of course in order to be counted by the King of the World. The story is going to be about them and the child about to be born to them. Luke is compelling us to see something. This is the story of two kings. Yes, keep Augustus in mind but keep your focus on this new king. For his job is to do battle with this old way of understanding the world. This new king is going to do battle with what Caesar Augustus stands for and present to us a whole new way of life and understanding the world.

Luke tells us there is no room for them in the Inn at the beginning of the Common Era. What does this mean? Can you imagine what it must have been like for these travelers who had come some 100 kilometres only to discover there isn't any room for them in even the most basic of hostels? Now consider. Where is Caesar Augustus? Caesar Augustus is in his palace on the palatine hill in Rome the place where the emperors lived. His was probably the best house in the

ancient world thus making Caesar the most protected person in the ancient world. Then there is this new king. He has got no place to lay his head because he was born in a cave out in a field.

What is Luke trying to tell us by this contrast of the two kings? In a world dominated by sin, the good life is the protected life and the elegant life represented by nice things. However, what is the true good life? It is the life that is vulnerable, willing not to be safe. This new king stakes out a whole new position as he is born in a cave.

We are told Mary wraps Jesus in swaddling clothes. Who is the most powerful person in the ancient world? It's the guy back at the Palentine Hill, the Roman Emperor. No one was more powerful. Caesar would simply express his will and it would be done anywhere in the known world. He had that kind of dominion and that kind of authority. Then there is this new king, this baby, new born... not a toddler, he can't even hold up his own head. Now wrap this child up in swaddling clothes making him even less powerful and free.

What's the good life? It is the life of freedom of power and expansiveness, where my will has dominion. The true good life is the one that is tied to the other in love. Not the life where my will dominates, but the life where I become willingly weak for the other. The Church Fathers liked to call to mind that the swaddling clothes evoke the burial clothes that will enwrap Jesus after his death. Jesus who is wrapped up because he is tied to the other in love. Here is the true king.

Then they laid him in the manger the place where the animals eat. Who was the best fed person in the ancient world? It was Caesar Augustus. Clap his hand and those who served him would bring him anything he wanted. He was the best taken care of person in the ancient world. That's the good life isn't it? Well protected and free, and full of pleasures. Then there is this strange new king who is not fed but placed in that manger where animals feed. He has come not to be fed but to feed the world. At that climatic moment in the Passion Narrative he is going to take bread and wine and say:

“This is my body, this is my blood. Take and eat it in memory of me.”

Then we hear the shepherds came. Now don't get all romantic with the shepherds. In the ancient world they were considered low-life, ne'er-do-wells. They were people on the margins of society and the last kind of people with whom Caesar Augustus would associate. But they are the ones to whom the angels appear and this tells us something about the kind of people with whom Jesus will associate. From the beginning, he associates with those who are poor and those who are marginalized.

Finally there are the angels. How easy it is to think of the angels as these cute little cherubs, so quaint and comforting. In the Bible, invariably the reaction to an angel is fear. When they appear people are so often afraid because these are powerful creatures sent from God.

Who had the biggest army in the ancient world? It was Caesar Augustus who could control the world with military force, violence and power. At Christmas there appears a new army that does not use the weapons of Caesar's army and his military tactics. No this army is made up of angels and is led by this baby who will fight with the weapons of God. These weapons include the breastplate of righteousness and the sword of love and boots of compassion. Weapons representing a whole new way of living in this world.

The good news is that Jesus out flanks Caesar and his army. This point is made most explicit at the climatic point of Jesus' life. For on Good Friday we see that those words meant as a taunt and placed by Pontius Pilate, Caesar's representative, *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, actually declare the truth. Here is the true King, not only of the Jews, but of all people. For while his death declared the victory of Caesar, his Resurrection continues to declare the victory of this warrior king and his subversive kingdom.

Here is the thing about King Jesus. Unlike Caesar, who demanded his subject's allegiance, Jesus wants us to lovingly and willingly choose him as our King. However, because of the kind of world in which we live we can easily conclude that there is only one kind of rule, the rule exercised by Caesar and all who are his political successors.

Christmas announces to us the reign of another. The reign of King Jesus, who when he inaugurated his kingdom 2000 plus years ago at Bethlehem invited then, and invites us, to see again on this Christmas Eve, that he is the true warrior king and who wants us to choose him too as our true king as we live by the values he established when born in that Bethlehem cave.

Will you let him be your king this evening? Will you give to him the authority to in love guide and rule your life?