Heralding the Messiah's nativity

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Mary and Joseph register for the census
- C13th mosaic from a monastery at Istanbul

Affirming the historical Jesus at Christmas

Christians may utilise the advent season to remind themselves and the world about the historical facts pertaining to the life of Jesus, and commend him as personal saviour and lord of all the nations. A starting point is to explain that the vast majority of scholars (Christian or not) regard the New Testament as a valuable historical source, and that ancient pagan Roman writers mention Jesus - though they gave him no respect! Three among them are prominent:

Pliny the Younger wrote in about AD 112 as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, asking the Emperor Trajan for his advice about responding to Christians, and criticizing their *disgusting, fanatical superstition* [*Epistulae* 10:96].

Tacitus wrote in about AD 116, keenly denouncing *a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.* He further explained that *... Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus ....* [*Annals* 15:44].

Suetonius wrote disparagingly in about AD 122, stating that the Jews rioted *at the instigation of Chrestus* [*Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Claudius* 25].

At an earlier time, the physician Luke connected the nativity to world events. Luke *carefully investigated everything*, and then wrote *an orderly account* in two books that he dedicated to the *most excellent Theophilus* (Luke 1:3) - a believer whose name means something like "loved by God", who may have been a Roman authority. Further, Luke makes reference to Augustus and to a census conducted *while Quirinius was governor of Syria* (2:1-2). Those positive references to Roman civic authority in the advent accounts make a most important New Testament commendation of God's gift of government.

Civic dimensions to the nativity in Luke's Gospel

The advent episodes presented by Luke provide us with important examples of God's interest in civic governance. They are seen firstly as we examine the dutiful response of Mary and Joseph to the census, and secondly when we see the shepherds testifying - regardless of restrictions on them as witnesses.

Mary and Joseph respond dutifully at the time of the census, as he went with her *to his own town to register* (Luke 2:3). We may constrast them with the reactionary figure Judas the Galilean who *appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt* (Acts 5:37). Judas was killed by the Roman government *and all his followers were scattered*. That episode in the Book of Acts is confirmed by the First Century Jewish historian Josephus, as he described Judas as leading a rebellion against the census (*Antiquities* 18:1).

While a ruler should not hold a census based on diabolical or self-reliant motivation (I Chronicles 21:1), it is helpful to tally the people to achieve a righteous aim (Exodus 30:12). Census taxes and data collection are necessary as the civic authorities *give their full time to governing* (Romans 13:6).

We may also perceive the sovereignty of God as the census required Mary and Joseph to journey *to Bethlehem* (Luke 2:4). This fulfilled the prophecy of Micah 5:2 regarding *where the Christ was to be born* (Matthew 2:4).

Another civic implication in the Gospel of Luke (2:17-18) may be seen in the response given by the shepherds after they had visited the newborn Messiah: *they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them*.

Shepherds were ill-reputed within Judaism and were banned as witnesses (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 25b). Thus the term *good* shepherd is used of Jesus who *lays down his life* (John 10:11), so outsiders may enter the fold. By God's grace, the shepherds are authorised to testify as they are inwardly compelled to speak - regardless of the unjust cultural and religious restraint.

As the shepherds effectively challenged the unwarranted restriction on their testimony, and as the holding of a census may enable the good functioning of government, Luke's account of the nativity may encourage modern Christian people to be more zealous when providing civic engagement and enrichment.

Lessons for government from the nativity in Matthew

Important civic implications of the birth of Jesus Christ may be seen as we compare two responses that are detailed in Matthew's account of the nativity. The first is seen in the action of the Magi who honour Jesus as lord. The second occurs as we see Herod the Great despising the newborn King of the Jews.

Disturbing Herod and all Jerusalem, the Magi gave testimony concerning the King of the Jews, saying: *"we have come to worship him"* (Matthew 2:1-2). Traditionally regarded as three kings from the East, or three wise men, they are better understood as astrologers or magicians. Nor is their number given in the Bible - although three gifts are named. This much we know about them: they commended Christ to Herod in word and deed, travelling to fulfil the aim of honouring the Messiah. That pilgrimage of the Magi prefigured the spread of the Gospel *to the Gentiles and their kings* (Acts 9:15). Like those Magi, *all kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him* (Psalm 72:11).

Sadly, King Herod stands in stark contrast to the Magi as he rejected Christ, and lied by saying he wanted to honour Jesus. Sending the Magi to Bethlehem, Herod said: *"Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him"* (Matthew 2:8). This in fact produced the first instance of civil disobedience in the New Testament, as the Magi were warned through a dream *not to go back to Herod* (2:12).

Then came a massacre after the Holy Family escaped to Egypt. By the order of Herod, his soldiers killed *all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under* (2:16). Like Pharaoh who rejected the grace of God (Exodus 1:8) and massacred infants (1:16), Herod commanded the slaughter of boys in Bethlehem. But like Moses who escaped death and was adopted into Pharaoh's household (2:1-10), Jesus was rescued and adopted by Joseph. Thus our Lord re-enacted aspects of the history of God's people.

Appallingly, a much greater killing of babies has occurred through abortion which became legal in many nations from the early 1970s. At the same time, adoption fell into gross disrepute in Western countries, though it was applied to Jesus from his nativity, and is also prophetic concerning the people of God - as *we wait eagerly for our adoption* (Romans 8:23) through the work of Christ. God's people today do well to challenge the abortion epidemic, and seek to restore community and governmental respect for adoption.

Ministry options for the advent season

As Christian people should *in every way ... make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive* (Titus 2:10), *making the most of every opportunity* (Ephesians 5:16), we may lovingly reach out during Christmas time - when unbelievers may be more open to the gospel. Practical options are as follows:

- Holding a community BBQ and carols-by-candlelight event in a park;
- Singing carols in shopping malls, retirement homes, hospices or hospitals;
- Distributing nativity bookmarks or gospel tracts to people in the locality;
- Giving Christmas cards to MPs, and asking them for prayer points;
- Writing to our military personnel overseas, via the Department of Defence;
- Screening archival Royal Christmas Messages during advent services;
- Hosting a free Christmas lunch for needy people in the community;
- Presenting Christmas hampers to police, ambulance officers and emergency services personnel - who are serving on duty over the festive season.

Proclaiming Jesus at Christmas

Advent expressions of love provide a timely basis for challenging individuals, communities and authorities with the truth about Jesus Christ, especially since Christmas festivities tend to overshadow him as the reason for the season:

Individuals may be urged to accept Christ as lord and saviour by renouncing sin, and receiving forgiveness - *"because of the tender mercy of our God ... to guide our feet into path of peace"* (Luke 1:78-79).

Communities can be urged to echo the angelic message: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests"* (2:14) recognising that only as God is glorified do we find peace - and only through his mercy. We may inform communities that as God's people we *seek the peace and prosperity of the city* and *pray to the LORD for it* (Jeremiah 29:7).

Authorities may promote peace by recognising that *the government will be on his shoulders* (Isaiah 9:6), and as we warn them that God *"has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble"* (Luke 1:52).

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