TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

No Way to Welcome a King

Luke 1.46–55; 2.1–38

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Introduction

It's conceivable that nothing in our collective experience, including footage of New York ticker-tape parades after World War II, rivals the scene when a Roman general, consul, or emperor led a massive victory parade through the heart of Rome. S. J. Hafemann describes the scene:

> As the focal point of the procession, the trimphator rode the triumph in a chariot. He was dressed in a purple toga, wore a tunic stitched with gold palm motifs and had a crown upon his head. His face was painted red and he carried an eagle-crowned scepter in his hand, all of which were elements taken from the depiction of Jupiter in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. The victor was surrounded by his soldiers and by leading exhibits of the spoils of war, graphic representations of the significant battle(s) on billboards and placards announcing the peoples conquered.
>
> Most significantly, the victor led in his triumph representative samples of the vanquished foes and leaders, the former being paraded through the streets as slaves, the latter in mockery of their former royalty. The parade route ended at the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, where the people offered sacrifices of thanksgiving and petitions for the future health of Rome. At the climax of the pageant, those prisoners and royalty who had been led in triumph and were not destined to be sold into slavery were executed in honor to the victor as the ultimate sign of his conquest and in homage to Rome's deity (Hafemann 2000, 1005).

One did not need to be in Rome to know about these celebrations, as Moyer Hubbard explains:

> Athough the triumphal procession itself was confined to Rome, the imagery of the conquest and the triumph was disseminated throughout the empire on coinage, which depicted vanquished foes, victorious generals, triumphal arches, and so on. Triumphal arches, which served as veritable billboards advertising the conquest, were also scattered throughout the provinces (Hubbard 2002, 206).

People in Israel would have also known about "the Roman triumph." Even if they didn't, their expectations regarding the coming Messiah, especially among those who expected a political and military figure, contrasted sharply with the method of Jesus's arrival (Fitzmeyer 1981, 395). In short, people in the Roman world knew how a king was supposed to arrive and be

welcomed. So, when Luke reported the arrival of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2.11), the populace would have been *under*whelmed. "Most regal figures are born with great ceremony and celebration. But Jesus' birth is as average as it comes" (Bock 1996, 83). That fact reveals God's mind and method.

Two Saviors

Luke begins his account of Jesus's birth by naming the world's most powerful man: "Caesar Augustus" (Luke 2.1). That is a title, of course, with "Augustus" having been bestowed by the Roman senate in 27 BC, "acknowledging his supreme position in the restored 'republic'" (Fitzmeyer 1981, 399). His birthday was celebrated as "the beginning of the *good news* through him for the world" (emphasis added). He was further hailed, especially in the eastern Mediterranean world, "as 'savior' and 'god' in many Greek inscriptions" (Fitzmeyer 1981, 394). His status was enhanced further by reformation and the calming of civil strife he had brought to the Empire, called the *Pax Augusta* (Peace of Augustus).

In that setting, Luke's claim about Jesus could hardly be more startling. Though he was born in the backwater town of Bethlehem and his first bed was a feeding trough,[1] he was "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). Later, Luke would highlight the fact that the crowds hailed him as "the King who comes in the name of the Lord" who brings "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19.38). But when Jesus was placed in the feeding trough, that celebration of praise was three decades in the future. In chapter 2, no birth could have possibly been less impressive, less ordinary.

The contrast between Augustus, the famous Roman emperor and Jesus whom Luke declared was "the real bearer of peace and salvation to the whole world" (Fitzmeyer 1981, 394) is even more pronounced when we note the people whom Luke reports first noticed and responded to his birth.

Chosen People

First, there were the *shepherds*. As small as Bethlehem was, the first announcement about Jesus's birth was not made to anyone inside to town, but to a group of shepherds who were tending their flocks nearby (Luke 2.8–11). But though the idea of looking for a baby in a feeding trough would have been unusual, what made the announcement especially significant—a "sign" (v. 12)—was that it was made to them by an angel and heavenly chorus (vv. 9–10, 13–14). Contrary to the way some have described them, shepherds were probably not known as a notoriously despicable group (Fitzmeyer 1981, 396). But we can say that "there were no more 'normal Joes' in ancient culture than shepherds" (Bock 1996, 84). As representatives of "the lowly of human society" (Fitzmeyer 1981, 396), they were the first to hear about and see the newborn King.

The second person singled out for special attention was *Simeon*. Sometime after Jesus's birth, Mary and Joseph arrived at the temple to present Jesus for purification as stipulated in the Law of Moses (vv. 22–24; cf. Exod 13.2, 12; Lev 12.8). There they encountered Simeon, a man described in a simple yet important way: "Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was

[1] "Feeding trough" is a better translation of φάτνη [*phatnē*] in verse 7 than the traditional "manger." For a discussion of the term, as well as the choice of "guest room" over the traditional "inn" (cf. NIV, ESV note; the Greek word is κατάλυμα, *kataluma*), see Anguish 2021, 121–122.

Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2.25). The Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen "the Lord's Christ" (v. 26). Thus, he was able to explain to Mary and Joseph (and all who read Luke's account) that, in Jesus, God was implementing his great promise and plan to Israel to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (vv. 31–32; cf. Isa 42.6; 49.6; 45.25; 46.13).

After their encounter with Simeon, Mary and Joseph met *Anna, the prophetess*. The elderly woman,[2] a descendent of the tribe of Asher, was completely devoted to serving God, so much so that she never left the temple (Luke 2.36–37). She would have hardly received more than passing attention from those who came and went in the Temple, but she possessed insight about "the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38).

The fourth person of note is *Mary*. She is more familiar, held in high esteem even among the many who do not venerate her. I don't think Luke would be critical of that appreciation, but in his telling, she is esteemed in a different way. From the outset, he focuses on her lowliness (Luke 1.26–27, 34, 38, 48). In our text, of course, she is the mother who gave birth in the livestock feeding area (2.6–7). Also, the details surrounding their presentation of Jesus in the temple indicate that she and Joseph were too poor to afford a lamb for her purification burnt offering (2.24; cf. Lev 12.6–8).

And even with the privilege of being Jesus's mother, she was left to marvel and ponder the events surrounding his birth, trying to make sense of things that would not become clear for several years (2.19, 33). Contrary to the way some apparently think of her, "Mary's pondering and treasuring of all these things did not result in an immediate insight into Jesus' status as divine. Luke never puts it that way, and the Christian reader should not too facilely so conclude" (Fitzmeyer 1981, 398).

Serving King Jesus

In the birth of Jesus, we see the mind and method of God. In fact, it is Mary who first expresses what God was inaugurating in this event. In her reflection of praise following the announcement that she would be a mother and her visit with Elizabeth, she included these words:

> He has shown strength with his arm;
> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
> and exalted those of humble estate;
> he has filled the hungry with good things,
> and the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1.51–53).

God was turning upside down the very things Augustus and millions since have thought are most important, exalting those who are "of humble estate" (Luke 1.48, 52) and reserving his mercy "for those who fear him" (v. 53). As Mary summarized, it is "the hungry" who are "filled with good things" (v. 53). Luke demonstrates this truth in his accounts of the people who are featured in chapter 2: the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and Mary.

[2] Verses 36–37 say either that Anna had lived as a widow until she was 84 or that she had been a widow for 84 years (see the ESV note). Choosing one or the other option does not affect the meaning of the text.

For us, an important challenge of this text is to internalize its meaning. We are still tempted to think that what matters is greatness like that of Augustus, not the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

- We get caught up in size, excitement, and greatness as defined by those things, sometimes appearing to forget that from his birth onward, Jesus "live[d] without pretense" (Bock 1996, 84).
- He sought out and used the likes of shepherds, servants like Simeon and Anna, the humble, and the hungry; we are tempted to look for "our kind of people," whether someone "can really help us," etc.
- He began with the lowliest of servants, in a quiet corner of the world, and changed the course of history; we are tempted to wait to be served, and to get involved only if it makes sense to us.

The challenge for us, then, is to seek to think more like God and trust his methods.

Conclusion

Darrell Bock summarized the impact of the events surrounding Jesus's birth as follows:

> In the ancient world, if anyone had asked if there was a more important person than Caesar, the emperor and ruler of the vast Roman empire, the answer surely would have been no. Yet it is the birth of a little boy in a rural Judean village that causes the angels to launch into praise (Bock 1996, 83).

The lesson we should learn from that is the one Mary already knew. "His mercy," she said, "is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (Luke 1.50). As people who need that mercy, we must not neglect to show that fear in our lives.

Each of us, therefore, must decide: will we pursue God's mind and method or seek another way?

Works Cited

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