

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 9:1-7; Psalm 96 (95); Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Glory to God in highest heaven and peace on earth

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The birth stories are found only in Matthew and Luke, as is well known. Like all Gospel stories, they are written in the light of the resurrection. Again, like the Prologue of John, they serve to provide a Christological key to the identity of Jesus in the rest of the narrative. Again, like the Prologue, they establish a significant level of continuity with the revelation to God's first chosen people.

Both Matthew and Luke write in dialogue with patterns and personalities from the Old Testament and, to a high degree, the writing is determined by those earlier models. While there is indeed a historical core (the Holy Family, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem), nevertheless these accounts are "parabolic" (even haggadic) in nature rather than history as we would understand it today.

KIND OF WRITING

In the context of the culture, this is "historical" writing, mirroring the conventions and practices of the time. In such cases, the writers use common-places, to express the significance of the person being written about. The goal is to proclaim the present, living Jesus and not merely to present the past.

Two backgrounds need to be considered, Jewish and Greco-Roman.

(i) *Midrashic* commentary was a form of filling in the gaps, answering questions that the Scripture itself did not make clear. Accordingly, we might consider certain of the apocryphal writings under the same rubric.

The Greek works of Philo and Josephus (esp. *Jewish Antiquities*) also expand the biblical text, fill in gaps, allegorise, and otherwise interpret the Bible in ways reminiscent of the rabbis. Many of the traditions that these Jews quote in their interpretations of Jewish Scripture find parallels in rabbinic *midrash*.

Neither Mt 1-2 nor Lk 1-2 is strictly *midrash*. *Haggadah* was another kind of devotional writing designed to instruct and uplift. However, the strong links to biblical models and motifs lend a very strong biblical air to the writing.

(ii) In Greco-Roman culture, the birth of a ruler is sometimes celebrated with a list of his (future) benefit to all humanity. E.g. the Priene Calendar Inscription:

Thought for the day

The birth of any child is always a source of wonder, when we feel nearer the mystery of life and closer to God. In the birth of Jesus, we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see. The thrilling reality of the Word made flesh is both gift and call. In the words of the first letter of John, Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11). We are challenged to love the God we cannot see in the neighbour we can see. There can be no separation of these two realities: to love God is to love your neighbour and to love your neighbour is to love God.

Prayer

Today love itself became flesh like one of us, so that you, O God, might see and love in us what you see and love in him. May we see you and love you in our brothers and sisters.

Since providence, which has divinely disposed our lives, having employed zeal and ardour, has arranged the most perfect culmination for life by producing Augustus, whom for the benefit of mankind she has filled with excellence, as if she had granted him as a saviour for us and our descendants, a saviour who brought war to an end and set all things in peaceful order; and since with his appearance, Caesar exceeded the hopes of all those who had received good news before us, not only surpassing those who had been benefactors before him, but not even leaving any hope of surpassing him for those who are to come in the future, and since the beginning of the good news on his account for the world was the birthday of a god...

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. (Wis 7:4)

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Is 1:3)

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one

who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic 5:2).

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6)

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Is 52:7)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. (Acts 2:22–24)

ST PAUL

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 1:1–7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Augustus was the grand-nephew and adopted son of Caesar, and therefore *dei filius*. On his death in 14 AD, Tiberius became emperor. There was no worldwide census in the time of Augustus. Luke is mixing up a census of Syria, which took place before the death of Archelaus in 6 AD, under the governorship of Quirinius. The solemn beginning resembles 3:1. Augustus was regarded as the saviour of the world and the bringer of the pax romana. Luke challenges that

especially in v.14.

Verse 2 Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was a real historical figure, from Lanuvio (Lanuvium) near Castelgandolfo, who was made legate of Syria in 6 AD with the special task of restructuring Judaea as a Roman province.

Verse 3 There is no evidence for such a disruptive practice. It does, however, echo the instructions for the Jubilee Year, a theme in Luke 4:16–30.

Verse 4 City of David would normally be taken to be Jerusalem; here, of course, it refers to Bethlehem.

Verse 5 This is a quick summary of Luke 1:26–38.

Verse 6 Cf. Gen 25:24 and Lk 1:57.

Verse 7 “Firstborn” meant a particular status in the Jewish Law, without prejudice to other children being born. The old word “swaddle” is a direct echo of Wis 7:4, where the whole context is interesting. Solomon, son of David, was also wrapped in swaddling clothes. The reference to the manger was filled out in the iconographic tradition to cause an unkind echo of Is 1:3. It can mean a variety of things: a private home, a room, an inn, a space in a stable.

Verse 8 The shepherd echoes the David tradition. This has also been used to date the actual birth of Jesus to between March and November, when shepherds would be out in the fields. Shepherds were sometimes considered outcasts. Bethlehem: cf. Mic 4–5, esp. 5:2 (above).

Verse 9 Glory: cf. Luke 2:9, 14, 32; 4:6; 9:26, 31–32; 12:27; 14:10; 17:18; 19:38; 21:27; 24:26. Shone: cf. the conversion of St Paul in Acts 26:13.

Verse 10 “Do not be afraid” is a commonplace of angelic appearances and theophanies. The long English expression “bring good news” is a single verb in Greek, “I gospel you”, so to speak.

Verse 11 “Today” is a favourite expression of Luke. Cf. Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32–33; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; 23:43. Saviour is unexpectedly rare in the Gospels and Acts Mt (0) Mk (0) Lk (2) Jn (1) Acts (2). Cf. Luke 1:47; 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23. Christ the Lord (common in Paul) is rare in the Gospels and Acts Mt (0) Mk (0) Lk (2) Jn (0) Acts (1).

Verse 12 Jesus, not Augustus, is the saviour. Cf. Is 9:6 and 52:7.

Verse 13 Luke underlines praise of God: Mt (0) Mk (0) Lk (6) Jn (0).

Verse 14 Glory is the visible manifestation of divine majesty and a strong contrast with the fragility of a new-born baby. Highest heavens, i.e. into the further reaches of heaven, so to speak.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Bring to mind a time when the birth of a child made a huge impact on you. Use the experience to meditate upon the incarnation.

2. There is great joy in the Gospel tonight. Have you ever felt such spontaneous, exultant happiness? A prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Saviour of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host, that we may sing your glory on high.

Give us a place among the shepherds, that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 9:2–7

What do we hope for? This passage from the prophet Isaiah helps us to recognise the longings of the human heart in a grand progression of metaphors: darkness, harvest, slavery, battle, birth, kingdom and justice.

SECOND READING

Titus 2:11–14

This reading has been chosen chiefly perhaps for the opening sentence. What is being offered? Who is being addressed? How should we act, therefore?

GOSPEL

Luke 2:1–14

The heart of the Christmas proclamation is here. And yet, familiar readings can be hard “to hear again for the first time”! There is a big contrast between the powerful figures of the Roman Empire and the humble birth of the Son of God.

The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. 15 *Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is beautifully laid out and teaches us that, as Christians, we live in the in-between time, our lives marked by memory and hope. It is chosen today because it underlines that salvation is for all, without distinction. The claims about Jesus put the writer on a collision course with the Empire (see below).

Many scholars think this letter does not come from the hand of the apostle himself. Titus is a document of the second or even third generation of the Pauline churches.

KIND OF WRITING

The Pastorals present themselves as personal letters from Paul to significant companions. In reality, they are written to communities (in Asia Minor) to bring Pauline doctrine into a new context. They preserve, however, the letter structure, as in the case of Titus:

- 1:1-4 Salutation
- 1:5-3:11 Body of the letter
- 3:12-15 Travels, greetings, blessing

The body of the letter:

- 1:5-9 Elders
- 1:10-16 Warnings
- 2:1-10 The Christian household
- 2:11-15 Appearance of Christ**
- 3:1-11 To the whole church

For completeness' sake, v. 15 is added (it does capture the different *tone* of these documents). Some of the resounding vocabulary used here marks the text as *not* from Paul: to appear; saving (= salvation as an adjective; to renounce; worldly; worldly; self-controlled (= lit. wisely);

godly; manifestation; great; to redeem; of his own; to look down on (all these expressions are never found in the undisputed letters).

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The writer(s) of the Pastorals were facing a variety of threats at the start of the second century. In response, it is true that there is some domestication of the radical Paul but there is more to it than that.

The letters also represent a development of Pauline doctrine in several directions: (i) spirits, angels and the Holy Spirit; (ii) the church as the household of God, with great regards for the inspired Jewish Scriptures. The tension towards the end found in Paul is abandoned—there will still be a second coming, but it is in the very indefinite future.

As for date and place, mostly likely it comes from Asia Minor, around the year 100.

RELATED PASSAGES

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 3:14–15)

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began—in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour, to Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour. (Titus 1:1–4)

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we

might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The grace of God is evidently bringing salvation to all; it is not limited to one people (e.g. the Jews) or to an élite (e.g. Gnostics). At the heart of this first appearance stands the cross and resurrection.

Verse 12 This pile-up of attitudes teaches us that we are to live truly transformed lives in response to this great grace. The Christmas feast can be cosy and “harmless.” Taking it earnestly means embarking on a journey of deep change. The gospel is an all-or-nothing offer of life transformed.

Verse 13 There will be a second appearance. The Gospel is lived in hope between these events. “Great God and Saviour” was found in Ephesus in an inscription dedicated to Caesar. For the author of Titus, the Gospel proclaims another great God and saviour, Jesus Christ.

Verse 14 There are allusions here to the genuine Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-21. The “for us” indicates that not everyone has responded; it is also an echo of the Suffering Servant theme. The biblical language of chosen people etc. is applied here to the Christian community. Again, a transformed life is indicated.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. At Christmas, once we get past the tinsel, we encounter “the scandalous particularity of the incarnation” at the heart of Christian faith. Who is Jesus in my life? How do I experience his salvation?

2. As we get older, we gradually get used to living in-between birth and death; there is for us another in-between: the fact of Christ and hope we have in him. This is the basis for our transformed living.

PRAYER

Saving, healing God, you reach out to us in Jesus, bringing light into the darkness of human life. Help us put our hands into his hands, that he may bring us to you.

Grant this through him, whose light has shone, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy God for ever and ever. Amen.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us

Is. 9:1 *But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is an especially appropriate and loved reading for Christmas Midnight Mass and the setting of parts of this text in Handel's Messiah have made it even more familiar. The themes of darkness/light, child and the throne of David fit the feast. Nevertheless, it does come from a particular moment in history and has to be read first of all in its religious and political setting.

KIND OF WRITING

Is 9:2-7 is a prophetic oracle in the form of poetry, reflecting the conventions and techniques of biblical poetry generally. The parallelism is evident, for instance, in vv. 2ab and 2cd. As the verses proceed, there is insistence by sheer force of repetition. Thus in v. 3, we have joy, rejoice, exult. The suggestion of dividing plunder (after and implied victory) at the end of v. 3 is continued in the military metaphors of vv. 4 and 5. Thus a reversal of a national calamity is envisaged.

What has brought this about? The birth of an heir to the family of David. Tremendous hopes are placed on the shoulders of this child. Of course, there is no way of knowing that a child would have been able to achieve all this. Instead, the birth is taken to be a mark of God's continued fidelity to the house of David and the salvation to God will be the work of God himself. In all the colourful imagery in vv.6-7, important words are profiled: peace, justice, righteousness.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As noted elsewhere, the present book of Isaiah reflects three distinct periods. The original Isaiah of Jerusalem was active from about 738 BC (Isa 6: 1) until 701 bc, perhaps until 687/6 BC, i.e. a considerable ministry of some forty or fifty years. His preaching is preserved in Is 1-39. The period was a time of transition from prosperity and security to insecurity and threat as the Assyrian empire flexed its muscles. In the time of Isaiah, there were several conflicts with Assyria: 743-738, 735-732 (the Syro-Ephraimite war), 714-705 and finally 703-701.

Our excerpt comes from the period of the Syro-Ephraimite war. During this time, Isaiah preached the uncomfortable view that the Assyrians, under the marvellously named Tiglath-Pileser III, were an instrument of God, sent to punish and to bring Israel back to true faith in Yahweh. Isaiah 1-12 deals with the condemnation of Judah (through Assyria) and God's offer of salvation through renewed fidelity. The cycles of promise (2-4) and threat (5-11) are interrupted by Is 6:1-9:7, made up of oracles dealing with the Syro-Ephraimite war. This block forms the core of Is 2-12 and provides the theological heart of the chapters. The traditions about Zion and the Davidic monarchy are expounded and explored. The typical pattern is threat, punishment, salvation.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Several passages, too long to cite, come to mind: 2 Samuel 7; Is 2:4, 7:14; Is 11:1-2, 8-9

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 Darkness represents the calamity which has befallen the kingdom of

Judah; light is used for deliverance through a new king "of David's line".

Verse 3 God is addressed ("you") and given the credit for the restored community, leading to great rejoicing. Harvest: the fruits of labour; plunder: the fruits of conflict already over.

Verse 4 Note the emphasis: yoke, bar, rod. In Judg 7-8, Gideon's victory over Midian delivered the people from foreign oppression.

Verse 5 An end to war is pictured here. Cf. *He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.* (Is 2:4)

Verse 6 The historical referent is a child born of Davidic ancestry. "Mighty God" might seem too much for a human being, but the NAB translated "God-hero". In any case: wisdom, heroism, fatherhood, peace. Prince of peace: the king establishes a save socio-economic environment for his people.

Verse 7 Peace is emphasised again. The import of the very last line has been well captured in the NET translation: The Lord's intense devotion to his people will accomplish this. This "zeal" is a covenant quality of God in relation to Israel.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Recall times when you have "walked in darkness". What was it like? What helped you to keep going? Was there a turning point, when darkness turned to light?

2. A birth is always a joy! Think back to the joy of your own parents when you yourself arrived in the world. Use this very natural human happiness to come close to the happiness of today's feast.

3. Endless peace sounds great, but, as we know, peace is always "under construction", always fragile, always in need of support. Where have you experienced peace? What about your own commitment to be a peacemaker, a bearer of peace to others?

PRAYER

Loving God, our light and our hope, show yourself once more as our true guide. Teach us to recognise in your Son Jesus love which you alone give, the peace the world cannot give. Amen.