

AS a CHRISTMAS GREETING from BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, here from my studies, Nora's working, and Ashley's guitar playing, and school work, and Joshua and Mark's play, I thought I would share these notes with you, which I took from a Christmas presentation by New Testament Prof. Robert Smith of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. They are background and implications of the Christmas story in Luke. Here are a selection of his ideas, and at the end I hope to add a thought or two of my own.

He referred to the cover of the Lutheran, this year's Christmas issue, which pictures all the animals around the manger. But Luke never mentions any animals. Where do they come from? From Isaiah 1:3:

An ox knows its owner
and a donkey the manger of its Lord,
but Israel lacks all knowledge,
my people do not understand.

The Greek word for manger or stall, φάτνη, or φάτνην του κυριου, "the manger of the Lord," is the same one used by Luke for Jesus' manger, and so all the animals from Isaiah knew to find him!

Now a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to make a census. That is of course necessary for responsible fiscal planning - for Augustus boasted he found Rome in brick and left it marble. Not only did he need money for building plans, but to fight the Germans in the North and the Persians in the East. But no census taken for the whole world is recorded in history for that time. It says Quirinius was governor of Syria. He was the imperial legate, the highest ranking authority of the eastern province, Syria, to which Judea was attached. But he ruled 6 - 9 A.D. And Herod died in 4 B.C. "All went to be enrolled in their own city," this would be necessary for property appraisal, perhaps, but not for an ordinary census taking. It is important to allow these problems to remain, because they become the key to the story, for by resolving them, we learn what Luke is telling us.

In Greek "a decree" is a Δογμα, dogma, which is sent out to the whole world: οικουμένην, ecumené, and Luke wants the political figures Quirinius and Herod to be background.

Acts of the Apostles is naturally Luke's volume II, and it has surprising help for these historical problems. In Acts 17:6-7, Paul and Jason are said to act against the decrees of Caesar, Caesar's "dogmas." Back in chapter 5, Peter and James are in prison, in a famous passage which argues for inaction against the apostles, (5:36-39), Luke relates some important information: Theudas led an insurrection, but in 44 B.C. But the one he mentions of Judas, the Galilean, is well known. It took place in the year 6 A.D. and Luke adds: "in the days of the census!" And in history a special census is recorded for that year. Archelaus, son of Herod, had succeeded him, even though he was completely inept. Mismanaging all his properties, the Romans confiscated them, and did a general census with property appraisals, in order to auction all his estates off. During this census, Judas the Galilean rose up in rebellion. But this census could very well have made Joseph return to his home town of Bethlehem.

Luke's whole story needs to be read in the context of the rule of the Roman Empire. Luke is relentless in his use of

imperial language, we would say political language for Jesus. A king is born! But Luke never presents Christ or Paul as rebellious. The Kingdom of God can co-exist with that of Caesar.

Augustus or "Sevastos," in Greek, is the title Octavian chose for himself in 27 B.C., almost choosing "Romulus" after the founder of Rome. Tiberius followed Augustus in 14 A.D. and ruled until 37, after which Nero became Caesar. When Paul appealed to Caesar, it was Nero he appealed to!

Luke is writing about God's own sovereignty, God's government, which becomes misunderstood as a political and military challenge to Rome, a movement to overthrow its government. The question revolves around Luke's obvious choice of imperial language. Does Jesus, Paul and the people about to be called Christians, represent a real threat to Rome, or is it a perceived threat, caught in a misunderstanding?

The way the movement is perceived does clash with how Jesus and Paul and the others perceive themselves. Luke 23:2: We found this man (Jesus) perverting the empire, forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king. Or a colorful rendition of Luke 23:5: This man has been carrying the torch of insurrection from the North all the way down here to Judea. In Acts 24:4, Paul is called a pestilent fellow, an agitator, a ringleader, a plague (like the Aids). Christians are perceived as law breaking, tradition breaking people, not only those of the Jews, but of the Romans as well. But Paul answers in Acts 25:8, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended at all." Paul never mentions his Roman citizenship, although Luke likes to.

Returning to the birth narrative: Jesus is also completely obedient. He is in the womb, but with Mary and Joseph he returns to Bethlehem, to comply with the census, to be obedient to the decree of Caesar.

Luke features the poverty of the child, born in a stable. That also has a parallel with Caesar, who kept a small hut in the center of Rome, supposedly that in which Romulus lived at the founding of Rome 753 B.C. From the hut to imperial palaces, like Abe Lincoln from a log cabin to the White House.

Caesar Augustus ushered in the pax Romana, forty-five years of peace, from 31 B.C. - 14 A.D., that is, a time with no civil wars. The senate declared this Roman peace, and honored Augustus for it by dedicating a massive altar to him, an altar of peace, which has recently been restored and can be seen in Rome today. But there was no peace for Rome's neighbors. Tacitus quotes a British king defeated by the legions: "Romans create a desert and call it peace."

Luke contrasts Caesar's decree with the decree God sends out to the whole world: the $\Delta\omicron\gamma\mu\alpha$, dogma, which is sent out to the whole $\omicron\iota\kappa\omicron\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta\nu$, ecumené

the Good News of great joy, a sign for all people
proclaimed by the army of the heavenly hosts
Glory and victory to God in the Highest
Peace on earth!

The decree is political and anti-political at the same time. It is better told with anthems, hymns, and stories than with essays. God has yet more light to shine forth from God's Word! Here are the politics of God: as politician, Jesus is sent by God, to be the Good Shepherd of the sheep, sent to usher in the peace of God! The pax dei! The εἰρήνη τοῦ Θεοῦ!

Caesar's dogma is far outshone by the dogma of God in the Highest proclaimed by the angels.

Now shepherds were despised people. We might relate them to used car salesmen. Are you going to get a straight story from them? The question answers itself. If only 95 sheep are left of a hundred, and they claim five are lost. Don't believe their stories. They ate them.

Bethlehem is David's town, and the shepherd was the ruler. The kings were the shepherds. For Psalm 23, the Vulgate title reads: Dominus me reget. "The Lord rules me." The Lord is my ruler. Bethlehem, even though you are the least of the towns of Judea, from you shall come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel! All the others are thieves and robbers - but I myself shall become your Shepherd.

This is political language for building a new community with new possibilities and energies.

On an Egyptian coin of that day, Nero was on one side, and Augustus, written ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ, "SEBASTOS," on the other. Both wear a radiant crown, because they present themselves as incarnations of the sun god, who brings light to the world. They styled themselves as shepherds of people. So far notes from Prof. Smith.

One thing is sure, that the imperial cult had to clash with the worship and praise that could only belong to Christ. No matter how large an altar the senate built to Caesar, his limited peace lasted a mere forty-five years, and the emperor and the empire were falsely misconstrued as ultimate. Ultimate governance is upon Christ's shoulders. The way the empire contains and limits the powers of kingdoms, so the heavenly government of Christ contains and limits empires, those contemporary and extant, as well as all those which have existed throughout time. That makes the heavenly rule qualitatively different from that of earthly empires, and a heavenly politics always calls an earthly politics to account. Psalm 2 warns emperors and kings to humble themselves before God, and his Anointed, to be wise, and take refuge in God.

But the qualitative difference between earthly governments, kingdoms, empires and the rule of Christ is not reflected sufficiently in setting it above empires, containing and limiting them. In this way it might still be characterized as based on the ability and power to inflict death, whereas it is based on life and life more abundant. It is based on love, forgiveness and hope. It is based not in Lords over, but the Lord-Over-All, under all serving them, out on the front against evil, sin, death and the devil, dying for us, his underlings, instead of sacrificing the masses for the increment of his power.

"Sacrificing the masses" was an inadvertent ambiguity. (I'm

in grad school.) This Christmass, Christ has come that he might be the once-and-for-all sacrifice for us, the first-fruit of the new creation, of a new people, called to be the sheep of his pasture, the people of his hand....those for whom our Lord, the Holy Patriot of that holy city in that holy commonwealth, that emerald empire that ushers in the planetary and global peace, that our eyes have not seen, nor ears heard, nor heart been able to imagine and perceive.

Now as large and as great as the reign of Christ is, it is not distant, as centers of power in earthly realms usually are, thus doing more harm by their interventions than good. No, Christ is also the one who comes into our inmost hearts, rules, understands, persuades, and loves us. What good is the Kingdom of God if it does not flood my heart with peace, if the little cradle with the prince of peace does not rock gently there even for me? If the Christ child does not rest in heavenly peace in my own very heart? God is a center of power, but a qualitatively different power. It is the Gospel of the vulnerability of love. And there is no place for it here on earth, that is true, but ends up crucified. And yet it will conquer every place, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And finally, it is God's revolution. It is God's coup d'état. It is God pulling the carpet out from under our earthly powers, making the first last and the last first.

But to name God a revolutionary is a misnomer. Those governments and presidents which assert themselves against Christ are the really rebellious. And those who misuse our faith for a political and military overthrow of an earthly government are also misusing the Gospel. But from time of old, Christ has been more co-opted for the powers and principalities than for their overthrow.

Therefore the Gospel of Christ, the Prince of Peace, set on the eternal throne of David, will bring every earthly nation and empire to its knees, the way the majestic Kings of the Orient came of old and fell to their knees, with their tribute in hand: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, as a sign to all kings, presidents, and dictators of the earth.

For all nations and empires have to be laid low in the spirit, so that Christ can raise them up, and lead them subordinate in a victory procession to the throne of God, who has become all in all.

Democracy is another limitation of higher powers. But even democracy, even the people, will be held to account by the Christ of all the martyrs, who takes sides with the poor and the poor nations of all the earth.

So it is that political and imperial language is used and transcended in the birth narrative of our Savior, perceived by the enemies of his presence, as a threat, but by the friends of God, as the new Son, to rise

that the earth
might have a new birth of splendor!

