

Christmas Day 2020

Luke 2:11

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

Imagine the shock the shepherds felt when the stillness of the dark night was shattered by the appearance of a heavenly being. They went from darkness to light in an instant! We have all been in a dark room and the lights suddenly turned on, but there were no instant on lights in the ancient world. Light started with a spark then a flame and eventually the fire brightened. The shepherds had absolutely no experience with instant bright light. How bright was it? At least as bright as the noon day sun, probably brighter. It wasn't ordinary light. It was the glory of the Lord! St. Paul says that God “dwells in unapproachable light.” Light so bright that no one can come near it. Scared? I bet they were terrified. The old King James translation captures it best, it says “they were sore afraid.” They were so afraid it hurt! Have you ever been so afraid that it hurt?

But the terror didn't last long. The angel and supporting cast didn't appear to terrify the shepherds. Their fear was induced by the glory of the Lord, which illuminates human sinfulness. In the light of the Lord's glory the shepherds saw their sinfulness and felt its effects. Isaiah felt the same fear when He suddenly found himself in the Lord's presence. He cried, “Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips.” The Lord sent an angel to touch his lips with a coal from the altar. His sins were atoned and his fears instantly vanished, as if someone turned on a light. The shepherd's fears were assuaged by the angel who said, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings a great joy.” He had not come to terrorize them, but to tell them good news of a great joy; that this day in Bethlehem, the Saviour had been born. The Saviour who takes away our fears by taking away our sins, “Christ the Lord.”

Jesus was born during the reign of the great King known as Caesar Augustus. Augustus means ‘the exalted one.’ His actual name was Gaius Octavius Thurinus. He reigned from January 27 BC until August 14 AD. He had a long reign. His reign brought stability to the Roman state, following the chaos that culminated with the assassination of Julius Caesar. He was Augustus, because he brought peace and order to Rome and the Roman world. He brought peace to Rome and order to the empire through the use of force, known as the ‘Pax Romana,’ the Roman Peace. The Roman Peace was the peace of the sword. The angels who announced Jesus' birth proclaimed a different kind of peace on earth. The peace of goodwill between God and humans. The angels proclaimed the peace of forgiveness, in which God takes the guilt of our sin on Himself, through the giving of His Son. Gaius Octavius was Augustus in name only. Jesus was the truly exalted One. He is Son of God from eternity. He is image of the invisible God, through whom all things came to be; and in whom all things are held together. Jesus was a different king and He brought a different kind of peace!

Gaius Octavius didn't even know Jesus was born. In fact, it would be decades before the Roman Caesars even heard His name. Even then they didn't get it right. They usually referred to Him as Chrestus instead of Christus. It made little difference, as they didn't know what a Christ or Messiah was anyways. The most significant birth in human history was not announced to the most powerful man in the world. It was announced to shepherds, watching their sheep in a remote part of his mighty empire. That wasn't an accident of history, it was part of God's design. It is God's way to reveal Himself to the humble in heart and poor in spirit. As Mary sang, “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly.” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

How ironic that the birth of Him who is God's Son from eternity was unknown and unnoticed by the most powerful man in the world, a man who held the title of the divine son of the gods. The Caesars claimed authority as ‘sons of the gods,’ but Jesus truly is the ‘Son of God.’ Augustus was noted for his heavy handed, autocratic rule. Jesus was noted for His humility, kindness, patience and compassion. Jesus said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Augustus sought to increase his power throughout his reign. Jesus on the other hand, “Did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant.” Augustus used violence and death to maintain his rule. The Romans used terror to keep subjected people in line and obedient to Caesar's rule. The ultimate terror of Roman rule was the cross. Jesus made Himself obedient to His Father's will, expressed the depth of His love for Him and His service for us, by “becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” It

was through death that Jesus defeated death through death and in His resurrection showed Himself to be the Son of God and only Saviour of human beings.

Jesus calls us also to receive Him as Saviour in the humility of faith. St. Peter writes, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourself under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due to time, casting all your anxiety upon Him for He cares for you." Jesus calls us to come to Him with all the fears and anxieties of our lives that He may care for us in love and comfort us in His kindness. He comes to us in humble ways; through the word of the gospel, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He calls us to Himself with our sins that He may cleanse our souls of their stain and heal our spirits of their wounds.

Caesar Augustus, divine son of the gods, lived and he died. He had a long rule, but like all earthly kings, his reign and his life ended in death. He was son of the gods in name only. He was really a son of Adam as are all of us. Jesus died and He rose again. He lives eternally, because He really is the divine Son of God. The empire of Rome was feared throughout the world, but in time it too passed away. The kingdom of heaven that looked so insignificant in comparison with the glory of Rome, has outlived empires. The kingdom of heaven is God's righteous reign in the human heart, beginning with the healing of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ! The kingdom of heaven gives what no human agency can give, no matter how glorious and powerful: The peace of a good conscience in relationship with God. The forgiveness of sin and resurrection to everlasting life.

With the shepherds we hear the Christmas angels. We listen as they tell the glad tidings of the Saviour's birth: peace on earth and good will among those upon whom God's favour rests. We pray the words of the beloved hymn and say, "Oh come to us, abide with us Our Lord Immanuel." He comes in meekness to the humble in heart, to shepherds and to kings. He calls us to Himself, no matter who we are, regardless of whether we are high or low in the eyes of the world. He says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy and laden and I will give you rest. I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls." Behold the child born of Mary, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Come let us adore Him! In His Name. Amen.