

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

From the second chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke:

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered... All went to their own towns to be registered.*

None of us are unfamiliar with obeying the seemingly arbitrary decrees of an all-powerful government. For almost 10 months we have been living under a state of emergency which has granted the state government powers resembling martial law. Subsequently our lives have been at the mercy of the “health advice” issued to the Premier and Cabinet. I don’t say this to whinge; I say this because I suspect that 2020 is the year we are best able to sympathise with the sense of powerlessness under which ordinary first century Palestinian Jews lived during Roman occupation. I suspect that it is this year that we are also better able to comprehend the plight of Mary and Joseph – the tenuous nature of plans and arrangements which might fall through at any moment. In 2020 we understand that travel – something which many of us have taken for granted our entire lives – is actually dangerous and laden with potential pitfalls; difficulties relating to transport, crossing internal borders, and finding suitable accommodation.

And yet, although travel was difficult and quite potentially dangerous, the infancy narratives of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are chock full of people on journeys. None of these journeys are taken for the fun of it – none of these people set off because they fancied a stroll or because they felt like taking a holiday. In every case, there was an imperative which initiated the journey – an imperial decree, startling news brought by angelic messengers, a prophecy and the appearance of a peculiar star. None of these characters could possibly have appreciated at the time that people the world over would gather, year after year, century after century, to hear the story of their respective journeys to the manger, while the strong and powerful – the Emperor Augustus, the Governor Quirinius, the Jewish puppet king Herod the Great – that they would be relegated to playing the supporting parts.

It shouldn’t escape our notice either that among all our characters, there are no representatives of the Jewish establishment – no High Priest, no members of the Temple Council, no Scribes, no Pharisees, no Sadducees. In fact, according to contemporary first century Jewish thinking, the motley crew that we find gathered around the Christ-child – an unwed teenage mother, a manual labourer, uncouth nomads, or the mysterious Wise Men from the East (who were probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia) – these are the very last people who would have been expected to be caught up in the events which would bring forth God’s Messiah and signal that the appointed time had arrived for the Kingdom of Heaven to break into this world. And yet, there we have it: the Word made flesh, God incarnate, dwelling among us, born in more lowly circumstances than you or I, surrounded by people who were considered riff raff by the strong and powerful of the day.

But, in all of this, it is Jesus who has made the most profound journey of all – from the throne of heaven to the manger; from Lord of the universe to a babe wrapped in swaddling bands. The reality of the incarnation can be difficult to accept, and continues to be, along with the resurrection, one of the main stumbling blocks for orthodox Christian belief. The incarnation contains within the fabric of its conception a fundamental paradox which simply flies in the face of a materialistic objective view of the world. We are particularly aware of this in the post-modern West, but to an extent it has been ever thus – in his Gospel Saint Matthew records that when Joseph heard that Mary ‘was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit’ he simply couldn’t believe her story and had ‘planned to dismiss her quietly’ until an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that the child was in fact ‘from the Holy Spirit’. And in the fourth century Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the greatest ever theologians of the Church, expressed the great paradox which is the incarnation in these words:

The laws of nature are overcome...He who is not carnal is incarnate; the Son of God becomes the Son of Man...the self-existent comes into being, the Uncreated is created, that which cannot be contained is contained...And He Who gives riches becomes poor...

It’s hard to comprehend the logic of why God chose to show us His love by coming among us in this way – he certainly didn’t have to – but it’s for this reason that Christmas is our yearly reminder that God’s ways are not our ways, neither are God’s thoughts our thoughts – God’s ways and God’s thoughts are much higher than ours. But Christmas should also be a yearly reminder that no person and no thing is beyond God’s love or God’s use. None of the characters who find themselves at the manger expected to be caught up in the great things of what theologians call “salvation history” – they were all quite happily minding their own business before God intervened – but it only goes to show that God calls the most unlikely, seemingly ordinary, of people to do and see the most remarkable things. God will use each of us to achieve his purposes now, even if like Emperor Augustus and the Governor Quirinius we don’t realise that God is doing it. But if we are attentive, we may well hear God calling us to set out on our own journey – to be witnesses to the incarnation here and now, to take our place as members of the body of Christ in the world, and to work for the building up of the Kingdom of Heaven in our midst. Like attempting to travel during a pandemic, taking up God’s call is fraught with potential pitfalls – frustration, disappointment, anguish, and occasional despair are all part and parcel of serving God by seeking to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This might strike you as good reason to be apprehensive about taking up God’s call on your life, but if you dare to take the plunge and to start out on the journey to which God is calling you, you may well find (as I have) that God knows what he is doing after all, and that the frustration, disappointment, anguish, and even the despair is all worth it.

Martin Luther famously said that “The incarnation is proof that God is not against us”. With respect to Doctor Luther, I would suggest that this statement isn’t nearly strong enough. In the Christmas story, God entrusts great matters of salvation history to the most seemingly inconsequential members of the frail, flawed, human race and then became one of us himself.

Christmas is not only proof that God is not against us; Christmas is proof that God is absolutely, positively, unequivocally *for* us – as Jesus says in the Gospel of John, He came that we might have life, and have it to the full. I wish you all a happy and holy Christmas, and pray that all of you, and your families, would know the joy, peace, and love of God this Christmastide.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*