

“Quirinius”: A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for December 24th 2017 (Christmas Eve)
by Foster Freed

Luke 2: 1-7

One of the delights—also one of the challenges but for me chiefly one of the delights—of reading the New Testament, can be found in the many allusions through which the New Testament writers seek to connect the story told by the New Testament...

...the story of Jesus and the birth of his Church...

...seek to connect that story with the wider events taking place against the backdrop of Judea and the other parts of the Roman Empire. Nowhere is that truer than in Luke’s Gospel. Say what you will of Luke’s success—by modern standards—of his work as a historian; the fact remains that Luke’s intention was to serve not as a free-wheeling spinner of tall-tales, but as someone who saw it as his responsibility to write in such a way as to ground himself in the actuality of the events he was depicting.

Nowhere is that clearer than at the outset of his telling of the Christmas story, first locating that story in the time of a well-known figure, Caesar Augustus, but then proceeding to mention a chap by the name of Quirinius, introducing Quirinius as the Governor of Syria at the time of Christ’s birth. And the lovely thing, of course, is that very few of us would have ever heard of Quirinius if it were not for his inclusion—just in passing, but his inclusion all the same—as one of the cast of characters found in Luke.

Nor need we wonder as to whether or not Quirinius actually lived. He did! Nor do we need to wonder about the kind of life he lived; on the contrary, we know that he must have been a bright and ambitious fellow, gradually rising—from a far from distinguished background—to the higher echelons of the Roman bureaucracy. In short, he must have been a gifted man...gifted, certainly, with considerable patience to have survived the grief he would have received from the Jewish people who were far from pleased with the orders Quirinius had been tasked to undertake on behalf of Rome: specifically the taking of a census. At least at that stage of his life, Quirinius would have been a busy man...a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders...no doubt a man who was accustomed to giving orders to others: being in charge of others. But isn’t that...right there...isn’t that the great Christian irony, the great Christmas irony?

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I love the way...the way in which the remarkable 16th century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel captured that irony in his painting of the Bethlehem census. When you view that canvas from afar, what you see is a bustle of activity in all four corners: folks moving hurriedly in order to be registered. In the process, you can almost miss the quiet drama being played out front and centre, namely the arrival of Mary—a very pregnant Mary—in the foreground and yet, ironically, obscured by all of the movement (the hustle and bustle) that surrounds her. The irony, of course, is that Bruegel is

depicting Quirinius' world: a world in which the Governor of Syria was able to snap his fingers, order a census and enforce the taking of that census, local objections and local sensibilities notwithstanding. And yet we—like Bruegel—know better; we know where the real action was on that fateful day; we know which set of events would truly shake human history: which set of happenings would leave an indelible stamp on humankind.

And part...part of what needs to be said at Christmas, is that we simply do not know what God is up to in our world, anymore than poor Quirinius could possibly have known what God was up to in his world. *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to unfold.* And as we know—though only through the grace of hindsight: the real action taking place in Quirinius' world, involved the birth of a baby boy, who came indeed with healing in his wings, and salvation in his heart...and there was nothing Quirinius could have done—nothing Caesar Augustus could have done—to alter God's coming into our world through Christ. And yet!

The fact remains that God most certainly does craft out a role in this drama for Quirinius. He may not have been given top billing, not by a long-shot. But no: despite the fact that his is a walk-on, a brief cameo appearance in a drama he most certainly would not have fathomed...

...the fact remains that Quirinius is implicated in the story of Jesus Christ...as are all of us gathered here tonight. On the one hand, that means learning to remember that Christian humility does not mean pretending that we are mere bystanders: because we are much more than that, especially when we invite the God of Jesus Christ to mold us and use us in His service. On the other hand...well, on the other hand, what Christian humility does require of us, is the willingness to let God be God: to permit the One who guided Joseph and Mary to the manger, to permit the One who brought forth a Savior, to move in our midst. Perhaps in ways that will leave us as befuddled as Quirinius would have been, had he been brought face-to-face with the newborn Christ, and told that with the birth of this child, God's own light had come into this world, and God's very Word had been made flesh...had been made flesh in the flesh of this child: for us, and for our salvation.

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that all the world should be registered.
This was the first registration
when Quirinius was governor of Syria.*

The Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.