

12-24-25 Homily: “Why Quirinius?” – Luke 2:1-7

It’s fascinating to me, what the gospel writers choose to include and *not* to include as they tell the story of Jesus’ birth.

Take Luke, for example. He devotes two whole chapters to the birth story. There are angels behind every corner; half of the characters burst into song at one point or another. Luke’s got aging prophets, faithful shepherds, priests struck mute by their lack of faith.

But when he gets to the actual birth of the Messiah – the climax of the whole story – Luke has very little to say. The time came for Mary to deliver her child, so she gave birth to him, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

That’s it. Nothing about the birth itself – how long did it take? Were there any complications? Nothing about the baby Jesus – what did he look like? How much did he weigh? Did he come out with a full head of hair? We come to the centerpiece of the whole Christmas story, and suddenly Luke goes silent on detail. And instead, he regales us with a list of politicians – Augustus was Emperor of Rome, Quirinius was governor of Syria – and a detailed description of the census they were conducting at the time of Jesus’ birth.

It’s fascinating, the level of political detail that Luke includes in a story that otherwise feels so mythical, so *timeless*.

I think what really gets me, actually, is the part about Quirinius. I mean...where did he come from? And why on earth does he get mentioned by name? He shows up exactly *nowhere* else in the Bible! I actually looked him up, and Quirinius *does* have a Wikipedia page, but it’s nothing to write home about. The most interesting thing on there was that his marriage was short-lived and ended in divorce because he was convinced his wife was sleeping around and trying to poison him.

Now, what’s funny about all this is that, as it turns out, Luke may have gotten his political details mixed up. Matthew’s gospel, as we’ll hear in a moment, dates Jesus’ birth to the reign of King Herod, who becomes the villain of the Christmas story, when he seeks to find and kill the baby Jesus.

But Roman records tell us that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 2 years after King Herod died. Which means one of these two gospel writers had a bit of a ‘senior moment’ and wrote down the wrong politicians. And we never would have known about the mix-up if Luke hadn’t gone and mentioned Quirinius!

So...why? Why Quirinius? Why Herod, and Augustus? Why the census? Why impose all these historical and political overlays onto the Christmas story?

I wonder...I wonder if what Luke is trying to tell us is that Jesus is born into the real world. That Christ comes to us in this life, this world, in the middle of the mundane and the messy. Luke wants us to appreciate that although this story is the stuff of legends – angels, visions, and dreams – Jesus is born into our actual lives, and that changes things. The fairytale, timeless quality of Christmas comes second to the tangible truth that, in Jesus Christ, God’s love is invading the world. And that love comes to bear on real events and actual political realities.

To celebrate Christmas, some 2000 years later, is to dare to proclaim that God’s love still comes and invades our world. God enters our present reality – the larger, geopolitical mess of the world, and the quieter fears and griefs that we hold within. Jesus is born – while Quirinius is governor of Syria and while we are mourning the death of our sister, or celebrating the birth of a grandchild, or undergoing cancer treatments. Christ comes – in the middle of failing democracy

and of divorce. While we're wringing our hands over the fate of our nation, our or son's alcoholism, or our mother's deepening dementia. Into this real world, Christ is born.

And there is no part of us that this little baby's birth leaves untouched.

So friends, Merry Christmas. Joy to the world, your Lord is come. May it change you. May it change us all. Amen.