

The World of the First Christmas

With all the political and economic news you may have missed a curious item last week from Pompeii, Italy. Pompeii, you'll remember from your history classes, was the city that was wiped out when the nearby volcano, Vesuvius, erupted and covered the city with ash. The ash both killed the city and preserved the city, or at least the buildings. What's there now is an archeological treasure trove of buildings and statues and so on.

What is happening in Pompeii is that several walls and parts of these ancient buildings are collapsing. Two thousand years have taken their toll on Pompeii. And the Italian government has been a bit stingy with funds for preservation. And recent rains have perhaps done the most damage, saturating the walls of Pompeii's House of Gladiators and bringing them down.

Each crumbling wall is a reminder that the once proud and invincible Roman Empire has almost been reduced totally to dust. If a Roman citizen in Pompeii could see what has become of his city, now a warren of walkways trafficked by American tourists in shorts and dark glasses carrying camcorders gawking at chunks of stone held up by scaffolding, that person would be shocked. You see, Rome considered herself, the culminating civilization that had brought humankind to its absolute pinnacle. The Romans were a little over-the-top in their self-admiration. One of

their historians calmly observed that the Assyrians were the first great civilization. Then came the Medes, then the Persians, then the Macedonians and finally the world got it right with the fifth and final civilization—Rome. Rome was so great that her emperors were regarded as gods. Roman citizens didn't say a pledge to the flag. They worshipped and burned incense in honor of the emperor. The Roman civilization put together an imposing society that wove military, economic, political and ideological power into one grand net that held its far-flung client states together—including Palestine where Jesus was born.

Now someone here may be stealing a glance at your watch and thinking, "Is this church or a lecture on Western civilization? What does Rome have to do with Christmas?"

Well, there's a powerful answer to that question. The moment of Jesus' birth just may have been at the moment when Rome had reached the pinnacle of its power. We read this every Christmas in Luke: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." Think how many times you've heard those words! But have you ever heard a sermon about Caesar Augustus? Maybe not. What I'd like to say today is that the naming of Caesar Augustus—together with all

the references to the kings of the Roman Empire--are one of the most important features of the infancy stories.

Here's how that works. Augustus' real name was Octavian and he was the grandnephew of the deified Julius Caesar. Through conquest and tough administration, Octavian came to be known as Caesar Augustus. Octavian was probably one of the most skilled statesmen and warriors in history. Very quickly Augustus came to be known as One who is Divine, One who is then be worshiped. On one Roman ruin reads the inscription: the autocrat Caesar, the Son of God, the God Sebastos.

Now the reason that the Roman background is crucially important in the stories of Jesus' birth, is because a surprising number of details in the nativity stories are direct references to the occupying empire. For example, we read about the angels coming to shepherds. This scene when enacted by children in costumes makes a delightful photo op for proud parents. What we miss about the angels and shepherds is that the angel's song to the shepherds is so political and subversive that it would make Karl Rove or James Carville blush. "Unto you is born this day a savior." What we overlook is that the expression "savior" was one of the titles of the emperor. It's not a religious word. Caesar was considered a savior because he whacked enough people's heads off that there were no more

enemies. So peace descended on the Mediterranean world in Augustus' time. When the angels sing, glory to God in the highest and peace on earth, which must have sounded more like *Hail to the Chief* than *Silent Night*.

When we put on Christmas cards, "Peace on Earth" we're using words that were originally designed to be a pin prick in the pretensions of the Roman Empire. The baby in the manger, not the guy in the toga, was the real king, the real God, the real savior, the real peace-giver. And to say that while no less than Augustus was enthroned in Rome was high treason.

Here's what was behind those provocative words. The earliest Christians believed something very similar but daringly different from what the Romans believed. The first Christians believed that there were five great civilizations in world history. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, we read that the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and Macedonians had come and gone. These made way for a final and fifth kingdom. And it wasn't Rome! It was the Kingdom represented by one whom Daniel called the Son of Man. We might call that Kingdom the Kingdom of God. And we well know that Jesus repeated called himself the Son of Man.

Can you see what is taking shape here? What our original Christmas stories are giving us is a clash between the empire of

Rome and the Kingdom of God. The Roman Empire with its reliance on violence, occupation, worship of the Emperor, multiple gods--the whole bit--is an antagonist in the story. But what is being born in the coming of Baby Jesus is in direct competition. Coming into the world was the true kingdom of peace and good will. Somehow, the birth of Jesus was on the same plain and a competitor and threat to the gods of this world.

Someone here says, "I just wish that Christian faith would stay spiritual and personal and it wouldn't meddle in the affairs of the world." But is that what we're reading in the Christmas stories? The Christ-event is clearly in competition with the powers and values of the world. It's political. I'm not talking about partisan politics. I'm not talking about the current squabbles over whether the Bush tax cuts should be suspended or whether a new stimulus is needed.

The Christmas stories are political in the sense God came into the world in Jesus Christ to challenge and overcome the deep rottenness that weighs heavily on all peoples, like the enslavement of one people by another, or the domination of wealth by a privileged class, or the cultural practice of assigning disadvantage to women and girls, or systematic lying by power groups. The Bible has words for these forces: they are the principalities and powers of this world; they are the gods

of this world. And the good news is that Jesus and his Kingdom are advancing and banishing these powers.

We've all noticed I'm sure that the Christmas season has a special warmth and cheer about it. I'd like to propose that the warmth and optimism has to do with our intuition that because Jesus is come, our world is going to be better. The rottenness that sometimes is running the show isn't going to win. The world that has us working our lives away chasing false dreams, or the situations that suck the beauty out of people, dependency on drugs, or rejection because you're not pretty enough or from the right background, the endless ugliness of so many of our cities and popular culture, the subtle forms of cruelty that exist even in families—these are not going to be the final word! And you know how that prospect feels? It feels darn good.

Don't miss the clash-of-kingdoms part of Christmas. Maybe we should hang a little chunk of cement from Pompeii on our Christmas trees! Because Rome and all of its pomp and puffery is dead. And so will also die every power and tyrant that would take its place. Unto us a child is born. The Kingdom of God is at hand.