

## A Tale of Two Kings

Today's passage from Luke 2 might best be entitled 'A tale of two kings'.

Let me show you why by introducing you to the first king mentioned in today's passage. His name was Caesar Augustus.

(Luke 2:1-3). "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

"Caesar Augustus" reigned as emperor over the Roman empire from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D., 41 years in all. Although his birth name was Gaius Octavius, he had been legally adopted by the Roman king, Julius Caesar. Hence, when Caesar died, Octavius took the title for himself. What about the name "Augustus"? Well, Octavius had a fair bit of ambition—he wanted to be greater than any other Caesar before him! And so, with the approval of the Roman Senate, he dropped his name Octavius, and added the title Augustus. Augustus means "the anointed one" or "the divinely chosen one".

And so, here we have King No. 1— An ambitious man who intentionally changes his name so that everyone will know that he is greater than his father. This man claims to be 'the Anointed' or 'divinely chosen king' who has come to rule the world.

To give him some credit, Caesar Augustus's reign was marked by peace and security - the famous Pax Romana. How did he do it? Three ways--

First, much of Caesar Augustus's 'peace and security' was bought through his lavish building projects. All over the empire, huge buildings, monuments and statues were erected to show 'favour' to particularly 'worthy' communities. If you were in his good books, Augustus would make you feel proud to be Roman! Augustus also built a network of roads that linked up all the cities of his vast Empire. This was good for the business people, as trade and communication flourished during this time. All this contributed to 'Pax Romana'!

Of course, lots of money was needed to keep all these building projects going! That's why, during his 41 year reign, Augustus took, not one but, three censuses of the Empire, just to build up his tax base!

There's a second reason why there was peace during Caesar Augustus rule. Augustus, you see, also used all that tax money to build up his army! This, in turn, created a fear throughout the empire that if you tried to rebel, you would be quickly dealt with by Augustus' vast army. And so, there was 'peace' because no one dared to speak out! And with all these new roads around the empire, the army could easily get to every corner of the Empire to subdue any rebellion! That was the reason for 'Pax Romana'!

But there's a third reason why the Roman Empire during Augustus' day was peaceful—This Emperor had an intense interest in religion. Initially, religious worship was on the decline in the Empire, but Augustus was convinced that belief in the old Greco-Roman gods would make his empire great. So, not only did he restore eighty-two temples in Rome alone, but Augustus Caesar declared himself to be the 'Pontifex Maximus' (the great high priest) of the state religion. For 41 years, he assumed the position of 'mediator' between man and the gods.

And so, there you have King No. 1 named in today's passage—Augustus Caesar; bold, brash, confident, self-exalted, ruthless, conniving, iron-fisted, defender and mediator of the ancient gods. In his mind, he was 'the divinely chosen and Anointed One' .

Now, let me introduce you to the second king in today's passage.

Luke 2:4-7 "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

This 2<sup>nd</sup> king is just a new-born baby, and his mother is not even married! They recently arrived in Bethlehem from Nazareth because of an edict issued by the 1<sup>st</sup> king, Augustus. The 130 km. journey has taken them three or four days and they are exhausted. With all the visitors who've come into town for the census, the only place they can stay is a dirty stable. And that's where this King is born.

Now, here is a critical factor in the story: you see, this King is born in poverty, not privilege. He is born in obscurity, far from the comforts of a Roman palace. And the fact that He is wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in an animal feed trough is meant to be 'a sign' to the shepherds...a sign that they are not to look

amongst the well-to-do citizens of Bethlehem's elite, but in the poorer end of town. The shepherds are told by an angel that they will find this new-born King living even as they live... rough and dirty! For this King is one of them... "Emmanuel, God with us!"

Earlier, I said that Augustus Caesar had given himself the title, 'the Anointed One' or 'the Divinely Chosen One'. Don't you think it's funny that this is exactly the same title that is immediately given to the baby, Jesus! The angel makes this announcement to the shepherds, saying, "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ (that's Greek for "the Anointed One"), the Lord!" (that means 'King'). Such irony! The angel is literally contradicting the Caesar's self-proclaimed title by giving it to this baby! In other words, the angel is saying, 'Here's the true 'Anointed One'. Here is the real King who has been "Divinely Chosen" and who has come to rule the world!

What's even more interesting is that this isn't a title that Jesus gives to Himself—it is a title that is given to Him by heaven...by God, the Father! Unlike Augustus, who give himself this title to outdo his father and make himself bigger than his father, Jesus submits to His heavenly Father and accepts this title of 'Anointed One', even as it is bestowed on Him from on high!

When we come to verse 15 of Luke 2, we're told how this title "Christ, the Lord" makes the rounds in Bethlehem!

Verses 15-18 "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about'. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

You can imagine the shepherds running around Bethlehem, searching for the child. Once they find him, they can't keep it to themselves. They unashamedly tell all and sundry about this King, "the Anointed One", whom they have seen with their own eyes! As the citizens of Bethlehem are awakened by the commotion, they, in turn, begin to talk about this child, the new-born King!

Now, remember what I said earlier about 'Pax Romana'? Here's another amazing parallel! Although Augustus Caesar has initiated his campaign of peace through military force, corruption and bribery, this new-born king (also

to be known as the 'Prince of Peace') will begin his own campaign of peace, but in a totally different way. This King Jesus will be the initiator of a "peace that passes all understanding!" His peace will come, not through force or coercion, but by turning the other cheek, by going the extra mile, and by forgiving 70 times 7! Indeed, in the end, this King will even give up His life on a Roman cross in order to bring God's peace to the world...a peace with God and with our fellow human beings, sealed in our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Through His own death and resurrection, He becomes the true Mediator between God and humankind by reconciling us to the Father and to each other.

Truly, this is a tale of two kings! Indeed, as we set these two kings side by side, I hope that you are confronted by the two, very different, ways that our world works. On one hand, we have power and wealth and ego and pride all working together to manipulate the world for its own benefit. In this regard, Augustus Caesar was not unusual. Many more kings, rulers, dictators, prime ministers, presidents will come after him, following in his footsteps of power and wealth and ego and pride. Many more will come with the same goals of manipulation and self-aggrandisement. And world history proves that, every time, it's the people...the peasants, the poor, the struggling, the innocent men and women who simply want to live in peace...who suffer!

On the other hand, we have Jesus. Born in poverty and obscurity, this King comes to live as one with His people. Most importantly, he comes to die for His people! He is Emmanuel, God with us! His Kingdom is for us, the people! "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven..." Considering all these facts, I surely know which Kingdom I'd prefer to live in...and to which King I'd prefer to bow my knee!

Of course, history gives us an interesting twist to this tale of two kings. Did you know that the first king, Augustus Caesar's adopted son, Tiberias Caesar, was indirectly responsible for the crucifixion of the second king, Jesus? It always seem to happen that the kings of power and pride think they can exterminate our King of humility and love...but they were (and always have been) wrong! For, you see, this 'Prince of Peace' lives on!

Moreover, He is here! "God is with us"... to encourage and empower all those who wish to join Him in spreading His Kingdom of peace to all humankind! That's why, today, we remember His glorious birth... as well as His death...for us and for our salvation!

Let's pray.