

Christmas Eve 2011

HEAVENLY PEACE

Luke 2:1-15

Christmas Eve 2011

Analysis by Paul Jaster

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*14"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

DIAGNOSIS: Unstable, Gory War

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Pax Romana, Augustus Style*

Octavian's motto was "Religion, War, Victory, Peace." Peace by military victory (coercive force) thanks to giving pious service to the right gods-Jupiter (powerful father) and Venus (radiant love). Inscriptions say that for "making war to cease and putting everything in peaceful order" this adopted son of Julius Caesar was the "Savior of the World ," "Son of God," "One-to-Be-Worshipped" (Sebastos), the "Divine One" (Augustus), and that "the birthday of our god [Augustus]...the date of his nativity...signaled the beginning of Good News for the world because of him... leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who come after him."

That was 2,000 years ago and still we desperately seek peace by military victory thanks to pious service to the right God. "God bless America," our Commanders in Chief always say, often in a military context. The war on terror. Drone attacks. Trillions of dollars spent to protect our national interests. Some say that America is the greatest post-industrial empire just as Rome was the greatest pre-industrial empire, only we have an empire of bases rather than of nations. But why limit it to that? Don't we all have our own little empires that we rule by coercive force and impose peace and order where we can by decree? "Don't argue with me! I'm the parent! I'm the boss. Watch out, or God help me!"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unstable, Gore & Sleepless Nights*

Coercive force is necessary. Thank God for troops! It is part of God's left-handed way of ruling, the *civili disciplina* ("civil discipline," Apology 4.22), first use of the law. It keeps civilized people civil and a broken world in check. But in that very benefit, there's a dark side too. John Dominic Crossan diagnoses the problem (God & Empire): Peace by military victory doesn't last for very long. It's unstable and it's gory; being civil (using coercive force to domesticate people) leads to inequality and injustice. Civilization by definition(!) is unjust. It's a "protection racket," since the strong control the weak. And there is a constant escalation of violence. Violence doesn't work in the long run. (Non-violence doesn't seem to work too well either.) So pick your poison: chaos or injustice. Vigilant generals tasked with homeland security confess what keeps them up awake at nights-a dirty bomb, a nuclear Iran, biological weapons, cyber-attacks. Violence breeds anxiety and sleepless nights. And anxiety breeds violence. Hence the escalation. Our own personal fights on the home front have a way of escalating too.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God Is Grieved & Empires Are Obliterated*

Genesis 6 reveals how the left side of God's gut responds to the corruption and violence God sees. God is "grieved to the heart." And God is "sorry" that God made humankind. And God vows to "blot out from the earth the human beings I have created." And thanks to ever escalating violence, God doesn't even need a flood anymore. We already have in our own hands the tools of mass destruction. Eventually all empires fall like dominoes, tipped over by their reach and exhausted by their excesses. Empires and emperors come and go and die. And it's only a matter of time before the next domino falls and imperial might moves on

to yet another. God's left-handed way of ruling ends in death. Always death. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. Or, as Mary sings in her Magnificat, "The Lord...has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." With the good news comes the bad news, for empires and emperors at least. Be they big or small.

PROGNOSIS: Stable, Glorious Peace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Birth of a Real Savior*

Brazenly...boldly...gloriously, Luke "cribs" sound bites from Caesar's spin-masters to proclaim the good news ...and great joy!... of our salvation by the birthing of a child, a heavenly child, wrapped in our humanity and lying in a manger. Into Caesar's time, world, and place comes the delivery, the nativity of a God, whose birthday signals the beginning of good news for the world because of him: the "surpassing one" that Caesar's spin masters did not expect, and certainly not so soon. For here is one world ruler who does not just come and go and die, but who also is raised "for us" and "for our salvation." There is escalating violence, yes. The powerful see to that, for he challenges the potency and the ultimacy of their authority. But there is also an escalating grace. Crucifixion gives way to resurrection and to the ultimate victory of God. As Crossan says, "To raise a man from the dead says something about our mortality. But to raise a crucified man from the dead says something about the system that put him to death."

And what it says is this: God's right-handed way of ruling (Christ's unconditional love) overrules God's left-handed way of ruling (coercive force). Luke 2 tells us how the right side of God's gut responds to the corruption and violence God sees: "Do not be afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David

a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And ironically, even the great Augustus had a role in his own supplanting. It was a Roman decree that got the Savior in the right place both for his birth and for his death. For we know who is really calling the shots and pulling the strings. Not Jove but Jehovah. And not Venus’s radiant love for the Julian dynasty, but rather God’s august agapé, that brings “good news of great joy for all the people” of the world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Stable & Glorious Night

God’s right-handed rule in Christ brings with it a new stability. For as Romans 8 says, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord [our ‘domino’].” The gore is still there, the world still has its escalating violence, life is a struggle, there is still that cross, but it gets over-shown and covered by God’s glory. It’s “glory to God in the highest...,” the angels said to lowly shepherds pulling sentry duty-awake and watchful (their little flock’s version of homeland security and an image of the watchful and expectant faithful in the church). In left side empires, “glory” means “plunder.” In both Greek (doxa) and Hebrew (kabod), the word “glory” means “weight.” The weight of the booty won in battle. The more booty, the more “weight,” the more “glory.” Tacitus has one chieftain say, “[The Romans] rob, butcher, plunder and call it empire; where they make a desolation, they call it ‘peace’” (Agricola 30). Roman peace meant making a pact after the war with a defeated people and dictating all the terms. Unconditional surrender.

But, in the right side realm of God’s good grace, “glory” becomes the shekhinah, the visible, radiant, and abiding protective presence of God (much like the pillar of fire and

cloud that led Israel out of Egypt and kept them safe along the wilderness way, Exod. 13:21). It gives and heals and renews. And God is well-pleased to do it. And peace means the pact or “new covenant” God makes with God’s liberated people—one of unconditional love to those who are willing to believe it. This is the very pact that is lifted up and celebrated in the bread, wine, and word of the Christ Mass and in the lives of those who gather around it, and who are then sent out like the shepherds to declare this peace and live it, “glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen, just as it has been told to them.” For this is what pleases God the most: to believe in the Christ this good news proclaims and to bear the fruit that faith in him generates. “Ditto!” says John in his grand prologue: “And the Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son” (John 1:14). Or as The Message puts it, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Heavenly Peace

And it’s “...peace to God’s people on earth,” for those who see it and believe it, like the shepherd’s did. Many confuse Christianity with Christendom (a sad, militant, coercive mutant). But for those who truly catch on to Christ, there is a certain peace and freedom in knowing that God is in charge and so we don’t have to be top dog, the one calling all the shots, the policeman of the universe. Instead Christ can be born in us and we can become ones who bear Christ in the world by living out Romans 8:9-21 in all its radiant and glorious possibilities. We can rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, extend generosity and hospitality to strangers, even enemies. We can speak truth to power. As far as it is our control, we can live peacefully and non-violently with all. We

do not need to repay anyone evil for evil, but rather we can work to overcome evil with good. We learn from Jesus that dominoes is a building up game and not a knocking down game, and that the goal is to connect all the pieces in a one loving, equal way to the central domino (the Lord). And what a change! For this Lord's motto is war, cross, the victory of God (resurrection), and a peace that surpasses human understanding.

And so, in his little catechism Martin Luther gives some sage advice: In the evening when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Then repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and, if you choose, his evening prayer (It is a beauty!). Then "go to sleep at once and in good cheer." And "Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh! Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!" Sleep in heavenly peace! And what better night than on this night: the night of Pax Christi, heavenly peace, Jesus style. Peace by God's glorious coming in Christ. "Glory to God in the highest, and peace-peace-to God's people on earth."