

Christmas Eve

REGISTERED AMONG SINNERS

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Christmas Eve

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1 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 first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In 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!"

[15 When 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.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

DIAGNOSIS: Registered Among Sinners

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *No Choice*

Mary and Joseph (and now the child, too) had no choice but “to be registered” (v. 3). True, it was the emperor of the known world who had ordered them. But it was the Lord God who had first chosen them to be among the Children of Israel and in particular of the “house and family of David” (v. 4). At long last, the time had come to be counted, not only among the peoples of the world but among the people of the promise. Either way, they had no choice—which leads one to wonder if there is, in the final accounting, any real difference between the two. To make matters worse, it would seem, among them was the “Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Terrified*

If Mary and Joseph had forewarning that God was about to decisively make good on his promises (1:31-33, 54-55, 68-79), the poor shepherds had none. Being suddenly overshadowed by “the glory of the Lord, . . . they were terrified” (v. 9), just as Zechariah the priest (though both he and Elizabeth were “righteous before God,” 1:6), and his neighbors, and Mary had

been (1:12, 30, 65). Fear and terror before God is exactly what is expected of one who has no choice in the matter, but especially if one distrusts the power of God. But what then must be said about the “Savior” (v. 11) who was born in weakness—exactly, it would seem, like all of us?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Real Problem*

There is now no escape for us from the truth about ourselves! For God is at work here, Spiriting the conception of John by the elderly Elizabeth, and of Jesus by the virgin Mary: “For nothing is impossible with God” (1:37). If God’s Christ (Heb. Messiah) were simply a Davidic king destined to butt heads against the emperor of the world, then the outcome would be a foregone conclusion: Israel would be on the winning side and everyone else on the losing side. But this Messiah, it would seem, is much more than a Jewish king (see 23:34-41). (Even if, in Mary’s Magnificat (1:47-55) and Zechariah’s Benedictus (1:68-79), God’s “mercy” and “promise” and “redemption” and “salvation” and “forgiveness of sins” can be perfectly understood in terms of Jewish piety, Jesus is for us Savior and Lord only by way of his cross. Even the angelic “good news” and Gloria in vv. 10-14, absent the cross, is nothing more than a limited messianic announcement for the Jewish people.) But if Jesus’ terrifying crucifixion—that is, his full participation with us all in being registered as a sinner before God (and having no choice but to distrust God) was necessary for Jesus to be our Savior and Lord, then the larger problem we have is not with the emperor or any earthly power, but rather death itself—brought upon us by our own sinfulness before a holy God. And if sin and death is the larger problem, for Jews and non-Jews alike, then God is truly the absolutely real problem for us—a Problem to be sure that we ourselves cannot ever overcome.

PROGNOSIS: Registered Among Sinners, But Freely

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Registered among Christ*

What could only until now be said conditionally (Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria) by way of many half-promises, half-hopes (as late in the story as Luke 24:19-21), and the hidden “sign” of “a child lying in a manger” (v. 12), may now be proclaimed unconditionally, for God himself has done it: “In [the cross of] Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . . For our sake, God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5: 19, 21). In Christ, God “registered” himself among us sinners, in order that we might be “registered” with Christ before God his Father. In symbolic terms, as Jesus was dying, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (23:45). In terms that establish reality, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (24:5). The “good news” (gospel) that Paul and Luke are speaking, is that God has “forgiven our sins” (1:77; 24:47), not by Executive fiat but by creating for us an entirely new world, a new reality, a new creation, in Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *With Great Joy!*

The new reality is created in us by receiving with trust the gospel promise, and will be completed in us at the resurrection of the dead (of which Christ is the first-fruits). The “sign” of that promise, like the hidden sign of Jesus lying in a manger, is the “great joy” (v. 10) that such trust (or faith) brings, and is the great “treasure” (v. 19) of the Church. Faith in Christ and its hearty enjoyment are the opposite of that terrifying fear of death that marks us as creatures under the Law, and they are the only “keys” to the Kingdom of God. With these keys, the Magnificat, Benedictus, and Gloria are no longer understood by us as the pious canticles of an obscure messianic

Judaism, but as ongoing announcements (“good news”)—in which we now participate—from God to all people: God’s saving promises are fulfilled in the crucified Christ (see 24:46-49).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Free Choices*

The new life of faith, being a new creation of the Spirit of God, is framed by the things we do, by the choices we make. Thus Luke’s other volume, The Acts of the Apostles, is filled with Spirited doings and Spirited choices, for the Spirit is free. Faith naturally wants to proclaim Christ crucified, for without Christ faith cannot exist. Faith naturally wants to love the other, for faith only exists by reaching out in service to the other. Faith freely accepts the death of our old life with all of its false choices, and rejects even the best demands of that old time religiosity. It is true that our new life of faith cannot yet be fully appreciated, despite our “great joy,” for we continue to be sinners among other sinners; nonetheless it is exactly among other sinners (in Lucan words, to be “registered” among them as Christ is for us) where we need to be in order to exercise our Spirited faith and freedom through proclamation and through love.