

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* St. Luke 2:13-14

I hope that you all noticed the very intentional way; the very careful way that St. Luke starts his wonderful story of Christ's birth:

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*

Luke tells us very clearly the context in which this remarkable tale is set: in the reign of Caesar Augustus, we are told. But by mentioning the name of Caesar Augustus, Luke is doing a whole lot more than just establishing a time and a date; although he's certainly doing that as well. In speaking of Caesar Augustus, as he writes more than half a century after the birth of Christ, [in speaking of Caesar Augustus] Luke quite intentionally is trying to establish the political context, the social context, in which the story of Christ's birth is set.

And, in doing so, he is reminding all those who first read and first heard his Gospel of the great emperor who had rescued the Roman Empire from civil and political warfare; [the emperor] who had rationalised and reformed the empire; who had limited the size of the army that it might be better controlled; and who had insisted on consolidating the boundaries of the empire rather than continually being at war to expand it.<sup>1</sup>

In positioning this story within the reign of Caesar Augustus, Luke is reminding his readers of the greatest emperor in their history: a man who was revered long after his reign ended; long after he was dead. Nearly sixteen centuries after Luke's time, the English historian Edward Gibbons would coin the phrase *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, to describe the result of all that Caesar Augustus did: The Roman Peace; the Pax Romana; a peace that allowed the reformed Roman Empire to flourish and prosper for more than two hundred years. But Luke mentions the name of Caesar Augustus at this point in his account not so that he might praise the emperor's achievements; not to glorify his long-revered record; but rather, in a bold and yet subtle way, to condemn it.

Because, as we all know, looks can be deceiving. From the outside, from the distance, for example, of more than 1600 years, the peace of the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the Roman Empire, looked orderly and calm; but it was, as we might imagine, [it was] a peace imposed by military control; a peace negotiated at the point of a spear; with the blade of a sword. It was a kind of peace, for sure; but it was violence averted by violence threatened.

And, in contrast to that kind of brutal, violent, oppressive peace, Luke tells us a story of a very different kind of peace; a peace not imposed by the sword or the spear or the whip; a peace not inflicted on a crushed and fearful and subjected people; a peace not found in cruelty or bloodshed or power, but in the innocent, powerless, helpless cry of a newborn baby in a manger; in an angelic choir in the darkness of the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/lecture12b.html>;  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax\\_Romana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana)

night; in the quiet cooing of a young mother nursing her first-born son; in the wonder and amazement of shepherds kneeling to see what no eyes had ever seen before: in the wonder and amazement of seeing God born in human flesh.

Luke's story is a story that puts all other stories to shame; and holds all other kinds of peace in judgement. It's a story that is just as fresh, just as powerful, just as moving and life-changing now as it was then, nearly 2000 years ago. It's a story that challenges all of our assumptions and misconceptions: and yet still invites us to enter in; that, like the shepherds, we might kneel in humble, loving, adoration; that our own lives, and our own hearts, might be warmed.

Not *Pax Romana* but *Pax Christi*. Not some false Roman peace but the peace of Christ. That's what Luke is helping us to see. Contrasting Caesar Augustus' false peace with the true peace of the infant Christ; the true peace of humble service rather than the false peace of power and glory. Offering a defiant challenge to the false peace that Caesar Augustus, and every other emperor, and every other ruler, and every other power, so brutally, so vainly, conjures up; just as much right now as was the case then.

The desperate human scramble to possess and conquer, to alienate and exclude; to dominate and control; stands in sharp, bitter, contrast to the incarnate peace of the Christ: who gives Himself freely to the weakness of our nature; and the fragility of our lives; who, when grown to adulthood, will in much the same way give himself willingly and voluntarily to the arbitrary cruelty of imperial power, defeating that power forever by His death and resurrection.

*My peace I give you; my peace I leave with you,'*

Jesus said those words to His very frightened friends on the day of the Resurrection; and that same peace, those same life-saving words, He speaks right here, right now, to each one of us; And all those who still live in fear and doubt and worry.

*Pax Christi*, the Peace of Christ has nothing at all to do with the imposition of the world's false, fearful, peace.

The Peace of Christ is found in our deeply held, secure, confidence in God's love; the only power that enables us to give up the world's hopeless way of anxious grabbing and grasping; so that, instead, we might live compassionately with each other; in humble service for each other.

And it's only when we know that, as surely as we know anything else, it's only when we know that we are held safely by this God whose love was shown so clearly, so boldly, so powerfully, in His willingness to enter into each and every part of our fearful lives; to be born as one of us that we might be saved; perhaps it is only when we know that great love holding us safely, that we can give up the desperate, fearful scrambling that tears and mars our world. *Pax Christi*: the Peace of Christ.

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."*

May this Christmas be a time of holy joy for you. May the Peace of the Christ Child fill all that you do. Christ our Saviour is born! O come, let us worship!