

Two Births, Two Views, Two Empires: Where Does Peace Lie?

From the series: The Vulnerability of God

Text: Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 2:1-58

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
December 21, 2003

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I conclude this morning the series on “The Vulnerability of God,” which has been our Advent series in which I have been once again trying to bring to your consciousness and awareness the nature of God as reflected in the Christmas story, particularly in the birth and the life and the death of Jesus.

As a Christian community, our claim is that Jesus is the word made flesh, that the divine intention from eternity came to temporal expression in the humanity of Jesus, and I would like to go on to say that it is in the emergence of humanity that we find the presence of that infinite Mystery coming into concrete form and being. If we believe that Jesus, in his birth, life and death, is, indeed, a mirror of the nature of God, then that God is a vulnerable God, in contrast to the God that the Church has set forth forever – and that we religious people have really wanted to have be the case – that is, the Lord God Almighty, Omnipotent, Sovereign of history, in control.

That is an interesting tension, as I have been saying over these weeks. I hope that, whether or not you appreciate and enjoy the tension, you nonetheless sense that it is not something that I have imagined or made up, but rather, something that is intrinsically in our Christian faith.

The God mirrored in Jesus is a vulnerable God. The God that we prefer is Almighty God, in control, able to secure us in our weakness, in our fear, and in our vulnerability.

This morning, just one more attempt to make that clear, with the contrasting of “Two Births, Two Visions, and Two Empires,” raising the question, “Where Does Peace Lie?” Two births - the one birth, Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor who was ruling at the time of the birth of Jesus. The other birth - Jesus.

In a poem written in 40 BCE, the Roman poet Virgil penned lines that express the longing of an ancient people for peace. It is in the *Fourth Eclogue*, a rather frequently mentioned poem of this great Roman poet. One stanza says,

“Now the virgin is returning,
a new human race is descending from the heights of heaven,
a birth of a child with whom the iron age of humanity will end
and the Golden Age begin.”

We just sang “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” about the circling years, the coming ‘round of the age of gold, a reference to Virgil in the *Fourth Eclogue*. There are those who want to claim Virgil as the prophet unconscious, a pagan witness to the coming birth of Christ. But I don’t really think that’s necessary. It is amazing, however, that there was this fine poet who was looking for the birth of a child, and for the rebirth of the ages, one who was writing 40 years, give or take a few years, ahead of the birth of Jesus, one who was writing in the wake of the assassination of Julius Caesar.

We know more about Caesar from William Shakespeare than we do from ancient Roman history. I was reading some of that history again in preparation for today. It is fascinating history. There was the great Roman Republic with the Senate, and that excellent form of government that had been created. But, now in the last decades of the first century before the Common Era, there was violence, war, conspiracy, civil strife, and the names of Cassius and Brutus, for example, who assassinated Julius Caesar. Then Octavian, who was Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son and who was now moving toward the replacement of his uncle, Julius Caesar, but not without having to fight his way to that position. His opposition was the well-known Marc Antony, known perhaps better because of Cleopatra. Someone said history would have been different, had there been a different shape to Cleopatra’s nose. I don’t know whether that’s true or not but there was continual civil war, vying for power. The poet Virgil wrote in 40 BCE of this longing for peace in a Roman setting that was riven with strife. But, by 29 BCE, Octavian Caesar, or Augustus, as he became known, came into Rome, the sole ruler. Interestingly, whether conscious of Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*, or whether simply because this was who he was, his first official act was to close the temple of Janus, the double-faced god of war.

Augustus was a very astute ruler. The old republic in Rome was crumbling, and they were on the threshold of empire. They had created this sprawling expanse which could be ruled, it was assumed, only by power. And so, Augustus is trying to restructure something that would give some order and stability to society, creating a form of government, the empire, which lasted for a couple of hundred years. We talk about the *Pax Romana*, or the *Pax Augusti*, the two hundred years of Roman peace. It was relative peace; it was not perfect peace. But, there was order, security, civility and Augustus, in his ordering of that empire, yielded up the powers that he had been able to accumulate to himself and those powers were

given back by the Senate. It was a positive kind of situation that Caesar Augustus sought to install in that ancient world.

Was he aware of Virgil's poem, or was he simply another human individual who knew somehow or other, down deep, that there should be peace among humankind? In the year 9 BCE, he dedicated the gigantic Augustan Altar of Peace. In 1890 there was an excavation in Asia Minor in the town of Priene in which an inscription was found, "To Augustan, Son of God, Divine One," who was announced in this inscription as Saviour and God, who brought well-being and peace, and through whom would come this whole new order, this whole new age.

So, that was one birth and his vision was of peace. It was peace, however, at a price. It was not the kind of peace of which Isaiah spoke that would be the case when the one anointed with the Spirit of God came. It was not a peace in which poetically, symbolically the lion and the lamb would lie down together. It was empire, and the peace was an enforced peace. The Roman Legions, at the outskirts of that empire, protected its borders and kept its internal affairs under their thumb. So, there was a Roman peace, a peace through power that was the vision.

It is interesting that it was into such a world that Jesus was born, and into a little corner of that empire. We know something of that Roman peace and the circumstance and condition of that time, because today there have been all kinds of cross-cultural studies about the times of Jesus. Because Jesus was born in that period and we have the Gospels, we get a picture of the underside, if you will, of that empire which Augustus Caesar would have ruled in peace. We know it was a time in which a province such as Judea, part of that great Roman *Imperium*, was a province under domination and exploitation. We know that the landowners were being forced off their land. We know that there was urbanization which created all kinds of social dis-ease among the people.

Hans Küng suggests that it is no mistake that Luke in his Christmas stories, in his Gospel, sets the context the way he does. For, what is Luke trying to say? Remember those Gospels are written after Jesus is dead. Those Gospels are written in retrospect, and Luke is telling the story of Jesus, believing that Jesus was the one through whom peace and an alternative world would come. And so, how does Luke tell us the story?

He tells us that Caesar Augustus was ruling in Rome and Quirinius was the ruler in Syria, but he tells us that the birth of this Jesus was announced to a Jewish maiden girl, and that the word never came to Herod's court, the lackey of Rome, but rather, to some spiritual astrologers from the East who were on a spiritual journey. He tells us that the news of the birth was announced, not in Herod's court, but to shepherds in the field, the nameless ones, the poor ones, and he introduces the Gospel story with the song of Zechariah, the *Benedictus*, and of the song of Mary, the *Magnificat*.

It is not accidental that the story of Jesus, the life of Jesus, is introduced in the context of an expectation and a hope and a vision for peace and well-being in the world that involved the casting down of the mighty and the lifting up of the nameless ones, not accidental that it is cast in terms of the poor being fed and the rich being turned empty away. This is the story of an underdog people who, in the birth of this one, believed that somehow or another an alternative world will be effected. It is a vision, as a consequence of a birth, of a different kind of a social order. It is a vision of peace through vulnerability.

Caesar is born and his birth is celebrated and he has a vision of peace through power.

Jesus is born and his life is recorded and it is a life of vulnerability, a vision of peace through powerlessness.

Hans Küng says that we haven't lost the meaning of Christmas because of excessive commercialization. We have lost the meaning of Christmas, primarily, because we have made it a romantic idol, a song, a lovely story, a cozy narrative, and who wants to be the Grinch that stole Christmas? Who wants to be old Scrooge?

Well, just for five minutes or so, let me suggest that Christmas, as beautiful as it is, as lovely as it is, I wouldn't miss it - the beauty of the surroundings, the change in human feeling, the set of the heart. The world becomes a softer place at Christmas. So, I really don't want to put down anything that Christmas is able to do to humanize us and to soften us and to lead us into greater intimacy. Not at all.

But, I do want you to see that the Gospels that we claim to believe are political documents that tell the story of Jesus in a social-economic-political context which is intentionally set over against the political-economic-social context of the time of his birth. I do want you to see that Luke never really intended us to gather in beautiful sanctuaries with poinsettias and to give each other gifts and hugs and to cry a lot. Luke wanted to say, "I'm telling you the story of one who was born into a social context that was marked by Roman imperial power that was a system of domination and exploitation, and I want to tell you about the good news, not of Caesar Augustus, who indeed had a vision of peace through power. I want to tell you about the birth of Jesus who had a vision of peace through vulnerability."

They result in two kinds of empires - the Roman Empire, mighty Rome, magnificent in so many ways, the source of so much that is wonderful in Western civilization. But, Rome that ruled by power finally crumbled, finally over-extended, finally became weary of securing itself, finally became weary of defending itself, finally became vulnerable to decay from within because when

you have that pressure to domination, you have always to live with fear and insecurity.

Over against that is the birth of Jesus, whom we claim to be a reflection of the nature of God, whose vision of peace was a vision through powerlessness, whose empire we call the realm of God.

On Christmas 2003 you don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that I am thinking about Rome and that ancient story in terms of my own day and age. You don't have to be particularly perceptive to know that I am saying to you that the present superpower syndrome that has gripped this nation is a reiteration of Rome and the repudiation of Jesus.

The real world is tough and brutal, and I really don't purport to have answers as to how to find that alternative world of which Isaiah dreamed, where the lion and the lamb would dwell together and a child could play in safety. I don't know how we could move from this. When I say superpower syndrome, I am quoting a very astute observer of the present, Robert Jay Lifton, who talks about our mind set, that drive for dominance which has its own idealism about it, but which, in our confrontation of the war on terror, has increased that war, that terror, has expedited the recruitment of terrorists, and has not, contrary to all rhetoric, made us more secure, but more afraid.

I can understand Virgil, can't you, four decades before Jesus, in a Roman world torn with strife, longing for something different? I can understand Luke thinking now that he had seen the one of whom Isaiah spoke, because whether it is the pagan Virgil or the prophet Isaiah or the evangelist Luke, or people of common sense and good heart in every day and generation, don't we know that there is only one path to peace? It is not through power. It is not through might. It is not through domination and exploitation. It is in the creation of another kind of world marked by vulnerability which we say is like God. That is really what Christmas is about.

Christmas is gutsy.

Christmas is real.

Christmas is demanding.

Christmas is condemning. Because Christmas is about the way God envisioned the world. Some vision!

If nothing else in this Christmas season, I hope you will feel the dissonance, the dissonance between the present rhetoric and the Gospel declaration.

In your pockets, if you have a dollar bill, there is the great seal and under the pyramid it is *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. Do you know where that comes from? Virgil. We sang about it in “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” the Golden Age. Old Virgil four decades before Jesus talked about a Golden Age and hopes of the birth of one who would bring about a change in the world. Luke hoped for the same thing. It was Charles Thompson who created that great seal who put the date 1776 underneath the pyramid. Do you recognize that date? The birth of this nation, with all the idealism of a New Age and a new beginning.

Dear God, I wish this Christmas that we in this wonderful nation of ours, so richly blessed, could recapture that kind of idealism and could learn from Rome that the mightiest power on earth that would continue to perpetuate its position and privilege and power is going to live in fear and insecurity, under stress, every day of its life. And I wish we, with our considerable power and possession, would find a way to make Christmas come true.