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‘The birthday of the god was the beginning of the good tidings for the world.’

Those words would be fine on any Christmas card; they appear to capture the heart of the Christmas story. Yet they're not about Christmas, or Christ.

In fact, they were written several years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. They are taken from an inscription made as a birthday tribute to the emperor, Augustus.

Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, had brought peace to the regions around the Mediterranean – no small achievement after decades of civil war. Caesar was known as the saviour of his people, but his peace, the *pax romana*, was the result of conquest, of violent pacification, and for his opponents it was the peace of death.

‘I bring you good tidings of a great joy for all the people; to you is born this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.’ It is these well-known words from the Gospel read at Christmas Midnight Mass (Lk 2:1-14) that make the tribute to Caesar Augustus sound so familiar to us. Many scholars think that Luke, at this point in his Gospel, was engaging in blatant plagiarism, appropriating the language of empire in order to make the point that Christ, not Caesar, was God; that Christ, not Caesar, was the prince of peace.

To add to the impact of Luke's account of the birth of Christ, the evangelist begins by mentioning Caesar Augustus directly. Caesar – unknowingly, but with divine irony! – has summoned an unborn child to Bethlehem. In Luke's account, Caesar, the most powerful man in the world, is mentioned first. Next in line is Caesar's agent, Quirinius, Roman governor of the province in which the action is taking place. Then follows an unknown and unremarkable man called Joseph. Then his betrothed, Mary. Finally, there is a passing reference to an unborn child who, at this point in the story, is not even named.

What is Luke doing here? In a word, he is being subversive. At face value, he is making conventional reference to the great and the good. He is following protocol, starting with the most important and working his way down, starting with power and concluding with weakness.

But the reality is just the opposite: it is the unnamed, unborn child who is the centre of history, whose birth is to bring glad tidings for all. It is his Mother, entirely vulnerable to the conventions of her culture and her time, who occupies the position of the greatest influence with the King. It is Joseph, not the emperor or his legions, who is in the role of guardian and protector. As for Quirinius and Caesar, they are background, wallpaper, historical footnotes.

It was ever thus! Our faith insists that the most important action is hidden and unreported, that God's plan unfolds somewhere far inside the tumult of the times. And that, perhaps, is the greatest wisdom we can glean from Luke's story: that God is at work not apart from or beyond the tumult of the times, but deep, deep within it. May we grow, this Christmas, in the confidence that God is not at a remove but at work, deep within the events of our lives and of our times.



Photo: Edilio

Chris Hayden