

Solemnity of Christmas (Midnight) **December 25th**

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Many scholars believe that Christmas came to be placed on December 25th in order to counteract a pagan celebration called the Birth of the Unconquered Sun. This feast of the Roman religion was established on December 25th by the Roman Emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274. December 25th was also observed as the date of the winter solstice, the year's shortest day, after which the days began to lengthen again. Just when the darkness of night seemed about to suppress the light of day, the sun began to regain strength. This victory was cause for rejoicing. Christians chose this day because Jesus is the true Son who conquers the power of darkness. Since the 18th century this theory of the origin of Christmas has been widely taught.

Recently, another possibility has been suggested by some scholars. This theory of the origin of Christmas relies on the Bible itself to give us clues to the date of Christ's birth. These scholars begin with the appearance of the angel to Zachariah in the temple to announce the conception of John the Baptist. This appearance occurred when Zachariah was serving in the temple. If this service was for the feast of Yom Kippur, that would place it near the autumn equinox, around September 25th. Figuring nine months from conception to birth, puts John's birth around June 25th. We celebrate the feast of his birth on June 24th. In appearing to Mary at the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel told her that Elizabeth was already in her 6th month of pregnancy. That puts the Annunciation at the spring equinox, around March 25th (which is when we celebrate that feast). Adding nine months to that date brings us to Dec 25th as the date of Christ's birth. This also meshes with an opinion common in the early Church that Christ died on the same date (the 25th) he was conceived.

1st Reading - Isaiah 9:1-6

The season of Advent is past; the period of anticipation is complete. Now it's time to commemorate the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ some 2000 years ago.

Of all the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah is considered the greatest (greatness being measured by the volume of the writings). Using hindsight, through the lens of the resurrection, people have looked back to the writings of the prophets to see where they can see a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. Today's first reading is one of these.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry was exercised in/around Jerusalem. Little is known about his personal life. His devotion to Jerusalem traditions, the literary quality of his compositions, and his contact with the wisdom tradition suggest that he was from an upper-class family and was highly educated. He was married to a woman designated as prophetess (Isaiah 8:3) and had two sons. Oracles of Isaiah that can be dated securely relate mainly to political crises that occurred under Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) and Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.). In 735 B.C. (the beginning of the reign of Ahaz) Syria and Israel invaded Judah in an attempt to force it into the anti-Assyrian coalition; an attempt that ended with the Assyrian conquest of Israel (733 B.C.) and Syria (732 B.C.), with Judah becoming an Assyrian vassal state in the process (2 Kings 16:7-9). Isaiah spoke out against Egypt's attempt to press Judah, along with Philistia, to revolt against Assyria in 714 B.C., and maybe earlier. Isaiah's words failed to move Hezekiah, who revolted in concert with other small states, with a promise of help from Egypt. The revolt was crushed in 701 B.C. with great devastation in Judah. Hezekiah had to surrender and pay a huge indemnity (Isaiah 22:1-14; 2 Kings 18:13-16). None of Isaiah's oracles can be securely dated after 701 B.C., and his ministry may have ended about that time.

Today's reading dates from the early part of Isaiah's writing and looks for a successor to Ahaz in whom the promise of the dynasty will be realized. Here Isaiah describes him and the deliverance his coming will occasion.

¹ The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. ² You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing,

A correction has taken place, God has made right what was wrong.

As they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as men make merry when dividing spoils. ³ For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, And the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed,

The yoke, pole, and rod are symbols of Assyrian oppression.

as on the day of Midian.

The holy war tradition in which victory comes from Yahweh (see Judges 7:13-25).

⁴ For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames.

Holy war discipline often forbade the taking of booty.

⁵ For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.

Presumably, the child would be Hezekiah, Ahaz' successor.

They name him Wonder-Counselor,

The new king will have no need for advisors such as those who led Ahaz astray. This statement is linguistically quite close to what is said of Yahweh in Isaiah 28:29.

God-Hero,

The same term is used for Yahweh in Isaiah 10:21 where it is translated "mighty God" ("God-warrior"). A warrior and defender of his people.

Father-Forever,

Describes the quality of his rule, ever devoted to his people

Prince of Peace.

His reign will be characterized by peace.

⁶ His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, From David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

This results from the qualities of the king (previous verse), the promises to David (see 2 Samuel 7:16), and the virtues of judgment and justice which sustain the Davidic throne.

2nd Reading - Titus 2:11-14

The books of Titus and 1st and 2nd Timothy are letters written to the “pastors” (or shepherds) of Christian communities. Because the letters deal with church life and practices, they are called “pastoral letters.”

Titus was one of Paul's closest companions. He was a Gentile convert, came with Paul to the Jerusalem conference (A.D. 49), and Paul subsequently claimed that he had refused at that time to have him circumcised (Galatians 2:1-5). Titus later accomplished a delicate mission to Corinth to patch up relations between Paul and that community (2 Corinthians 7:6-16) and then served there (in Corinth) as Paul's delegate for the gathering of the collection for Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6-24).

Today's reading is from the portion of the epistle concerning teaching: false teaching versus true teaching. Paul has discussed the nature of false teachers (Titus 1:10-12) and is now enumerating what the true teacher is to teach. The reading for today has been called “God's saving action” and tells us that we are enabled to live virtuously in the present and with hope for the future by the saving power of God in Christ.

Beloved: ¹¹ the grace of God has appeared,

Grace is an abstract attribute of God; here it is personified. It has “appeared”. In the other pastoral letters it is Christ who “appears” (1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 1:10).

saving all ¹² and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires

Education was highly valued in the Greek and Roman societies. God gives us a true education to counter impiety and promote virtuous life.

and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,

Three of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude).

“You hear that the prophets foretold and predicted that men will no longer be bound to come from all over the earth to offer sacrifice in one city or in one place but that each one will sit in his own home and pay service and honor to God. What time other than the present could you mention as fulfilling these prophecies? At any rate listen to how the Gospels and the apostle Paul agree with Zephaniah. The prophet said: ‘The Lord shall appear’(Zephaniah 2:11); Paul said ‘The grace of God has appeared, saving all.’ Zephaniah said: ‘To all nations’; Paul said ‘Saving all people.’ Zephaniah said: ‘He will make their gods waste away’; Paul said: ‘training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.’” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 388), *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 5,12,9]

¹³ as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ,

Here, Jesus “appears” and becomes the actualization of God’s grace which “appeared” two verses earlier.

¹⁴ who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

These are the promises made by God (Exodus 19:5; Ezekiel 37:23) which had not been fulfilled because of the golden calf. They are now accomplished by Christ’s self-giving sacrifice which institutes the New Covenant.

Gospel - Luke 2:1-14

We now hear the familiar birth narrative from Luke – the anticipation of Advent is over as we celebrate the coming of our Lord.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. ² This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

There are historical problems here. Caesar Augustus reigned from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14 and Quirinius was governor in A.D. 6 and 7, but Jesus was born during the time Herod was king of Judea (Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1) during the period 37-4 B.C. It is generally accepted that Jesus was born in 4 B.C.. It has been suggested that Quirinius was acting as governor for Saturninus (the appointed governor) for the purpose of conducting the census. The important thing here is not to get caught up in the chronological details but to appreciate the word-picture which is being painted for us. Here, Luke makes a subtle contrast between Caesar Augustus who failed as an inaugurator of peace, and Jesus the Savior and bringer of peace.

³ So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.

There are records of a census of Roman citizens in 28 and 8 B.C. and A.D. 14, but none for 4 B.C. However both Tertullian and Justin Martyr (c. 165) state that in their time the records of this census still existed in the Roman archives. It would make sense however for Caesar Augustus to perform such a census so that he could find out who claimed that they were descended from King David and thus have a claim to the throne as king of the Jews. It was the Jewish practice to summon each householder to his birthplace to be enrolled in the census. Luke's purpose in mentioning the census, in any case, provides a reason for and means of getting Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David wherein the promised heir of David is to be born (Micah 5:1).

⁴ And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵ to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Jesus' Davidic background is highlighted again (see Luke 1:27, 32-33, 69-71).

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn son.

The firstborn had certain privileges in the family [inheritance, pre-golden calf priesthood, etc. (see Genesis 27; Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:12-13)] and there were obligations placed on the parents [dedication in the temple (Luke 2:23)]. The first-born of the flock was sacrificed as an offering to God; unless it was a donkey or a son, then it was redeemed (Exodus 13:13-15).

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes

See Wisdom 7:4. Like King Solomon, his predecessor on the Davidic throne (subsequent to Solomon the kingdom was divided), Jesus wears the trappings of humility.

and laid him in a manger,

A manger is a feeding trough (food box). Luke emphasizes throughout his gospel the food aspect of Jesus' ministry. Everything seems to happen on the way to a meal, at a meal, or just after one. This mention of feeding trough may symbolize that Jesus becomes the sacrificial meal which provides sustenance for the whole world.

because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸ Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.

David was also a shepherd (1 Samuel 16:11). In Luke's theme of poverty, it is the lowest of men who first have the privilege of seeing David's successor. As one commentator puts it, "mangy, stinking, bathless shepherds are, in their ritual uncleanness, an encouragement for all who lack religious status."

⁹ The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. ¹⁰ The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For today in the city of David

Today! Right now! The waiting is over, God's salvation is at hand and is being inaugurated.

a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.

Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer to use the title of "savior" for Jesus. Jesus, not the peace-bringing Caesar Augustus, is savior of humanity. For Luke, salvation means restoration to wholeness, rescue from sin and alienation from God. Salvation also includes a dimension of immanence – in Jesus God is present with sinners (Luke 19:5,10; 23:45); Jesus saves from destructive self-isolation to union with the nurturing human community (Luke 8:36).

12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

The manger theme reoccurs; along with the swaddling clothes.

13 And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: 14 "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

In Jesus God has effected God's end-time gift of peace. Deeds of peace and not worldly weapons are the tools of King Jesus. God's grace is for all human beings. As King, Jesus rules over the world; the New Israel.

Closing Thought

As we celebrate the incarnation of the Word of God this Christmas, we must make a conscious effort to remember that Jesus is always with us in the Eucharist, and to share our joy with others. Christmas is a season which lasts for 12 days, concluding on Epiphany (12th night) which should remind us to continue to share our joy of the coming of the Messiah some 2,000 years ago and again at the Parousia for which we all pray (Eucharistic acclamation—"Lord Jesus come in glory").

