

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

Pax Augusta, Pax Christi

Christmas Eve 2008

The Text Luke 2:1-7

The Birth of Jesus Christ

1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

When we think about the gift of Jesus:

1. In some ways God's gift to us at Christmas seems all wrong.
2. Furthermore God gives this gift in the wrong package.
3. Then he sends the gift to the wrong people.

God it would seem needs some help in knowing how to choose his gifts and who to send the gift to.

1. In some ways God's gift to us at Christmas seems all wrong.

Have you ever gotten the wrong gift for Christmas

Kind of like this guy:



Or.....

A woman was talking to her nephew just after Christmas. In a very apologetic way she says, "I'm sorry you don't like my Christmas gift, but I asked if you preferred a small check or a large check." With his head hung in disappointment, the nephew replies, "I know, but I didn't think you were talking about ties." I hope none of us will receive the wrong gift this Christmas.

Think, for a minute, about the world that Jesus entered. "In the days of Caesar Augustus. . . ." What was the world like in the days of Caesar Augustus?

Well, these were days of the most marvelous peace the ancient world had ever known! You see, forty years before this, Julius Caesar had died. And he died so tragically!

Remember the story?

Julius Caesar had welded together an empire even greater than Alexander's. His troops had conquered Gaul and the British Isles. The Germanic peoples bowed to the great Roman eagle. And Julius Caesar had forcibly put down civil rebellions once he returned to Rome. Now he was about to consolidate

his rule, and take control for governing away from the Senate. Of course, many resented that. And Spurinna, the soothsayer, wagged her finger at him, and told him plainly: "Beware the Ides of March!"

On the night of March 14, Caesar threw a party at his palace. The entertainment of the evening was to discuss the topic: What is the best death? Caesar himself said that the best death would be a sudden one. That night his wife had a dream of him covered with blood. And in the morning she begged him not to go to the Senate. But Brutus encouraged him to go. And on their way, they met Spurinna. Caesar said to her, with a smile: "Look! The Ides of March have come!" And once again she wagged her finger at him. "Yes," she said, "they have come! But they have not yet gone!" And a few moments later, Julius Caesar lay dead, stabbed mercilessly by his friends, including Brutus.

And then the Mediterranean world was plunged into ruin. For twenty years, war raged. Farms were neglected. Towns were sacked and wasted. Any wealth was carried off by the latest armed desperados. Administration had broken down. Every street was unsafe at night. Highwaymen roamed, kidnaping travelers, and selling them off as slaves. Trade diminished, investment stood still, interest rates soared, property values fell. Says historian Will Durant (*CHRIST AND CAESAR*, p. 211): "Rome was full of men who had lost their economic footing and then their moral stability: soldiers who had tasted adventure and had learned to kill; citizens who had seen their savings consumed in taxes and the inflation of war . . . women dizzy with freedom, multiplying divorces, abortions, and adulteries. . . ." The world was coming apart at the seams.

Julius Caesar was killed in March of 44 B.C. And that was the year that they opened the doors of the Temple of Janus in Rome, and didn't shut them again for 20 years! Janus was the god of war. And whenever any armed conflict was happening, they kept the doors of his temple open. Julius Caesar died. And for two whole decades, peace took a vacation from the earth.

But now the story changes! A child is born! At the age of four his father dies, so he is raised by his mother and a stepfather. At the age of 12, he has his first public appearance. He makes a speech at his grandmother's funeral, and people talk about it for years. At 18, he goes off to battle in Spain with

Julius Caesar. Caesar is so impressed by the young man that when Caesar is killed on the Ides of March, his Will declares the young Gaius Octavius to be his successor. Caesar was a god to the Roman people. So Gaius Octavius is designated the Son of God! And he's born to be king! The throne of the world belongs to him! But peace won't come easily.

Octavius will march around the countryside for several years, before peace is declared! In 29 B.C. the doors on the Temple of Janus are officially closed for the first time in two decades, and Rome is at rest!

The Roman Senate celebrates the occasion. It officially confers upon Gaius Octavius the titles Savior and God. He is declared to be Caesar Augustus, the ultimate ruler in the world. In fact, the Senate orders the building of an altar inscribed with this bold statement: PAX AUGUSTA! The Peace of Caesar Augustus is declared!

His birthday becomes a world holiday. Every city builds a shrine in his honor, and lifts up this banner to his name: THE SAVIOR OF THE WHOLE WORLD!

"In the days of Caesar Augustus. . . ." The world had everything it wanted, everything it needed! What a foolish thing for some other God to send a gift into the world of Caesar Augustus, and then to declare that this is what that gift is all about: PEACE ON EARTH! Ha! That's a gift that's not needed in this world, this world of Caesar Augustus!

And yet . . . And yet . . . Listen to what Epictetus wrote. Epictetus who also lived in these times, these days of Caesar Augustus. He said: ". . .while the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy." Says Epictetus: "He cannot give peace of heart, for which humanity yearns more than even for outward peace!"

In the days of Caesar Augustus, the PAX AUGUSTA ruled the nations, but it couldn't conquer the human heart. So God comes with his "wrong gift." "In the days of Caesar Augustus. . . ." While all the world basks in its peace of prosperity, its peace of power, its peace of commercial success, here comes silly old God, throwing in a surprise gift. Some might even call it a "gag gift!" Nobody thinks they need it! And that's just the point. "We've got

god Caesar!" They boast to one another. And yet . . . And yet . . . Here is the first thing we note: God gives us the wrong gift. And furthermore:

2: God gives this gift in the wrong package.

Remember how Isaiah put it?! Remember what he said was the cry of the ages?! He said it went like this: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down! That the mountains would tremble before you!" (Isaiah 64:1) If you're going to send us a gift during the days of Caesar Augustus, then at least make it greater, and more powerful than Caesar's armies! If the PAX AUGUSTA isn't big enough, send a bigger one! That's the way we would do it, if we were God! A God with a "mighty hand and an outstretched arm!" as the prophets said. A God with his dukes up, and his arms bared for a good fight! Send us a turbo-charged engine, in our competitive banter. You know: "The Force be with you!"

But what does this God of strange surprises do? He sends a baby! A helpless little baby! It can't even take care of itself. It would die without the tender caress of a mother! We look for the big gifts in the big boxes! We look for power and might! We look for something that would turn the world upside down! And then silly God goes and does something like this! Says the seventeenth century poet George Herbert:

"They all were looking for a king to slay their foes and lift them high.
Thou camest, a little baby-thing that made a woman cry!"

Remember Psalm 2? Remember this picture: "Why do the nations rage," asks the Psalmist, "and the peoples plot . . . The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." The nations and kingdoms and powers of earth gear up for battle, says the Psalmist.

And then, when the high and mighty Lord of Heaven and Earth throws in his forces, it's only a tiny, helpless baby in a cradle!

That's why the Prophet Isaiah could write in another place: Who would believe our report?! Who COULD believe our report?! A root out of dry ground, he called it. A tender plant. A helpless tiny child. We want God to

storm into our world, to take our side in the battles of life, to destroy our enemies, and transform our existences! We want God to play Santa Claus: And what would YOU like this Christmas? But somehow he goes on being God: giving us what we most need.

But here's the tough thing about Christianity, isn't it? " If God is so big and so powerful, why does he allow this to happen to us? Why did my child have to die?! Why, with all the advances in medicine, does this strange disease happen in our family?! Why do God's gifts come in the wrong sized packages?

And that brings us to the third thing, God seems to be sending the wrong gift in the wrong package . . . But then, get this!

3. He even sends that to the wrong people:

Whom do you give Christmas gifts to? To nice people, right?! To friends who are friendly, and to business people who have helped you out this past year. Sure, you may get stuck feeling obligated to pass off a gift to a relative you don't really like. But even relatives aren't usually all that bad.

And when God gives his Christmas gift, he sends it to the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem. Nice people, aren't they, these shepherds? After all, David was a shepherd boy! Couldn't get much better than that! And so it seems, in our Christmas pageants. The shepherds are the cute ones, the ones dressed up in their Dads' bathrobes, Grandpas' canes in their hands. Shepherds are the good guys, the simple folk who are genuine and down-to-earth.

But get this! In the world of that time, faithful Jews were warned by their rabbis against entering six professions. One of those forbidden occupations was shepherding! Conscientious Pharisees would never consider doing business with a shepherd! They would buy wool and milk, but never from a shepherd himself. Shepherds weren't allowed to give testimony in a court. In fact, shepherds weren't permitted to enter places of worship! They couldn't go to the temple or the synagogue. Why not?! Well, there were some pretty good reasons.

For one thing, shepherds were constantly walking among the droppings of the sheep, and this made them religiously unclean. Secondly, shepherds ranged their sheep throughout the countryside, without paying attention to property lines. In other words, they were constantly trespassing. And what's more, they were in the right position to pick up things along the way! Shepherds were considered to be thieves. They ran the local black market! Nobody loved a shepherd! Shepherds were liars " you couldn't trust their word in court. Shepherds were thieves " they'd steal you blind. Shepherds were dirty and disgusting. Shepherds were despised. Shepherds had one foot in hell.

And then God . . . Silly God! Doesn't he know what's right and what's wrong? Can't he see things the way we do? But God sends his best choir out into the skies that night, to sing the HALLELUJAH! CHORUS to people who can't even read music! And here's the greatest wonder of God's Christmas giving. He sends his Gift to the wrong people. Do you see the strangeness about what we're doing here in this service?

In the second century, one of the greatest critics of Christianity was a man named Ceisus. He had very little good to say about the Christian Church. In fact, in one of his cutting observations, he had this to say, "All other religions invite those who have clean hands and a clear conscience. But whom do these Christians invite? Everyone who is sinful, weak, and wretched, as if they were assembling a gang of thieves!" Funny how sometimes people can cut right to the heart of the matter. But there it is . . . God's Christmas present . . . Plopped down right in the middle of all our tinsel. The wrong gift! In the wrong package. For the wrong people And the announcement comes: PEACE ON EARTH! Whatever could that mean?! Whatever could that mean "during the days of Caesar Augustus? During the great PAX AUGUSTUS?

In April of 1961, Martin Luther King, Jr. was sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. He had been arrested for leading a demonstration. While he was in jail, twenty Christian leaders in Birmingham, pastors and teachers and doctors, wrote him a letter.

They said, in their letter, that he was wrong! He was unkind! He was unchristian! Why? Because he was disrupting the "peace" in their nice community! They told him, in the name of Christ, to cease his demonstrations, and to allow peace to return to their polite world. And

Martin Luther King thought long and hard about that letter. Here were all these Christian colleagues, begging him, in the name of Christ, to change his ways, to shut up, to give up his cause.

He laid the letter on the table in front of him. And he poured over it in prayer all that night. And in the morning, he wrote back a letter which has become a classic in the Christian church. It's called, LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL. And in it King says, "You want me to be quiet, and in that way to bring you peace. But, in the Bible, peace is not the absence of warfare. Peace is, instead, the presence of justice!" Peace is the presence of justice! And there's the contrast between the PAX AUGUSTA and the PAX CHRISTI. The Peace of Caesar Augustus forced the nations to lay down their weapons. But the Peace of Christ opened the hearts of the lost, and the last, and the least and the lowest to a place in society that they could not find themselves. Peace is not merely the absence of warfare. Any old Caesar Augustus can do that! But true peace is the presence of justice. Where someone cares enough to make things right for all those folks who otherwise get overlooked. Where folks like us get a chance to look into our hearts and ask whether the Pax Christi " the peace of Christ " lives in us. Says the poet:

Thou shalt know Him when He comes, Not by any din of drums,

Nor by anything He wears,

Neither by His crown, Nor by His gown . . .

But His presence known shall be By the holy harmony

Which His coming makes in thee.

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