

The Pax Romana and the Gospel of Disturbance

The first Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, is synonymous with a new age of optimism and hopefulness for the peoples of the Empire. This era of unprecedented peace, stability and prosperity came to be known as the Pax Romana. Jesus of Nazareth was born in to this world around 4 BCE. For his followers, Jesus' birth also heralded in a new era in which humanity would be created anew, right relationship on every level would be restored and God's moral claim upon the world would be fully realised. The coming of Christ for believers marked the Dawn of Redeeming Grace.

In an inscription dated 6 BCE and discovered in the Roman city of Priene in modern day Turkey the birthday of the Emperor Caesar Augustus is commemorated. He is acclaimed as both 'divine' and a universal 'saviour.' The form and structure of the Priene announcement is recognisable to those familiar with Christianity especially with the Christmas story. Augustus's birthday is declared to be 'good news or 'Gospel' (*euangelion*)) for all humanity. The inscription at Priene in shorter form reads:

“The birthday of the god [meaning Caesar] has marked the beginning of the *gospel* of the good news for the world and ***a savior, both for us and for our descendants.***”

Luke's style indicates that he at home in the Greco-Roman world and insinuated his message into its culture by using the currency of its common language and cultural markers. Luke was a cosmopolitan man, a traveller with a detailed knowledge of Greco-Roman cities, their cultural ambience, their administrative structures and their role within the Empire. In his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles for instance, Luke occasionally refers well known public inscriptions like the one at Priene. He used the form and some of the terminology in that inscription to compose his own announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds by the angels near Bethlehem:

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the LORD appeared to them, and the glory of the LORD shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you **good news that will cause great joy for all the people.** Today in the town of David a **Savior** has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the LORD. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*

What is implied in Luke's infancy narrative is an invitation to the reader to study the glaring contrast between the Emperor Augustus and the new born child in Bethlehem, who they were, the different worlds in which they lived and their social status. In Roman life, one of the most important of the civic virtues was *verecundia*, 'knowing one's place and not attempting to move beyond one's station in life.' In Luke's birth announcement story may hint at this. Luke's principal actor is not the ruler of the Roman world, dressed in garments of royal purple and sitting on the imperial throne in an opulent Roman palace. Rather, he is a Jewish infant, wrapped in cheap cloths and lying in an animal feed box in a lean-to near Bethlehem. Despite this, Luke's announcement of Jesus' birth is described as 'good news ("gospel") of great joy for 'all peoples' signaling the

birth of a 'saviour'. Luke adds further support for his universalist claims about Jesus in his genealogy. Luke traces Jesus ancestral line back through his Jewish origins in Abraham to the mythic first human being, Adam who is called 'son of God.' (Lk 3: 22-38)

Earlier clues Luke provides about Jesus the universal 'saviour' are found in the hymn of praise to God sung by Mary, his pregnant mother. She proclaims that, in and through her, God was disturbing and disrupting the old social order and bringing about new ways for human beings to relate to the Creator and to one another regardless of who they are or their station in life. Mary subverts the Roman notion of *verecundia* ('knowing one's place in the established order') and regime of social and religious determinisms embedded in her own Jewish culture. Her ministry of upset and disturbance would be take on a further dangerous incarnation in the life and teaching of her son, Jesus. Luke speaks for himself:

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the LORD and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. ... His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. *He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.* He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." (Lk 1:46-55)

In recent years large a number of writers have claimed that during the last two hundred years the public singing or recitation of the Magnificat have been banned in a many third world countries including India during the British rule; Peru, Honduras, Guatemala and Argentina during the internal conflicts during the 1980s. The reasons given were that Mary's anthem was regarded by the authorities as incendiary and subversive of established social order. Any authoritarian regime would have reasonable cause to be wary of the content of Mary's hymn of praise that celebrates the God who over turns the idols of repression and exploitation.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized Mary's song as a revolutionary anthem glorying in the great divine overturning of conventional logic and an oppressive, dehumanising social status quo. Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April 1945, just weeks before the end of World War Two. During Advent 1933, Bonhoeffer preached a powerful and moving sermon on the *Magnificat*:

"The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

When Mary's son Jesus launched his public ministry in the Synagogue at Nazareth, his message was strikingly similar to that of his mother. In Luke's narrative, some of the key elements in the words and action of Mary become programmatic for those of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus announced that he has come 'to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' (Lk 4: 16-30) The memory of Jesus' teaching and action became deeply embedded in the memory of the first Christians and quickly helped shape their own self understanding, create their unique network of community relationships and Church social structures. All of these were the drivers for their missionary outreach to the host society.

Sadly, often it has been the leaders of the Church who have become terrified of both Mary's *Magnificat* and the gospel of disturbance lived and preached by Jesus, her son. There has always been an institutional tendency in the Church to domesticate the power of the Gospel and to 'keep everyone in their place'. Yet, the call to conversion, a change of mind, heart and spirit are always there to balance it all. This remains as a tentative but enduring invitation to all believers to embrace the promise and grace of Advent.

[The Priene Inscription and the Lucan birth announcement: [Priene and Lucan texts compared](#) Accessed 12/12/2018) See also, <http://notrunningaimlessly.blogspot.com/2017/07/the-gospel-heralding-new-calendar-and.html> Accessed 10/12/2018]

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