

Second Sunday of Advent, year C

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Introduction

Luke's gospel is an extraordinarily political one. Over and over, the writer mentions the names of people in power, referencing their eras, areas of governance and even some of their policies. For week 2 of Advent, we are going to take a quick hop skip and jump through the political landscape of Luke's gospel.

Text

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Comment

Luke's gospel is an extraordinarily political one. Over and over, the writer mentions the names of people in power, referencing their eras, areas of governance and even some of their policies.

The readings for the past two weeks have been filled with warnings about signs of

the times. Now, rather than talking about signs, Luke's gospel text drops us into the actual events, describing in detail the political landscape of the times. Even a casual acquaintance with the gospel texts brings some familiarity with the complicated dynamics of conflict in the politics of the day — names such as Herod, Pilate, Judea, Pharisees, Scribes, Samaria, Syrophonecia, Gentile, Rome, all trip off the tongue, even though our knowledge about these geographies, groups and geopolitical realities might be patchy.

For the purposes of clarity about how comfortable Luke's gospel is in detailing political conflict, here follows some political history. Obviously these are broad brushstrokes. For detailed reading, you will find the books and links in the further reading section (below) helpful. A quick warning – you might want a pot of fortifying tea (or whatever your brew of choice is); you'll need it.

About 60 years before the birth of Christ, Rome conquered Jerusalem, and “Herod the Great” — from Samaria — was installed as a Client King. The fact that this role was a Samaritan one meant that the role was more familiar with Judean practices and religion than the Romans were, yet still distant enough for Roman manipulation. This Herod (there are a number of Herods, all Client Kings of the Roman Empire) expanded the temple in Jerusalem through heavy taxation and was complicit in the ongoing subjugation of the Jews in Jerusalem and Galilee.

The emperor at the time was Caesar Augustus. He lived from 63BCE to 15CE, and reigned from 44BCE. He was called the ‘Son of God’ and ‘Saviour of the world’ and songs were sung about how he'd ‘bring peace’. These names are already alerting us to the political potency at the heart of Mary's Magnificat (but more about that particular political piece of subversive hymnody on the fourth week of Advent). Zechariah's song, too, uses images from Exodus while prophesying how we will be saved from our enemies (1:71, 73) and those salty prophets, Simeon and Anna also have the cessation of foreign occupancy and subjection in their hopes. The political context of Luke's gospel is continued through the narrative of the Centurion 7:1–10), and even Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by opposing armies (21:20–24)

Luke's reference to Quirinius (although problematic in that it implies that Jesus birth was post 6AD whereas Herod the great died in 4BC, meaning that Mary's & Elizabeth's pregnancies could not overlap) is a clear obvious reference to that census being an occasion for a rebellion led by Judas of Galilee from which came the Zealot movement. That Acts 5:37 mentions Judas the Galilean's revolt in connection with the census indicates the associations that were in the evangelist's mind. All of these political references locate the emerging story of God's saving love amidst the reality of political chaos.

Back to Caesar Augustus... He oversaw the aftermath of Herod the Great, who died in 4CE.

On Herod the Great's death, the Emperor Augustus honoured the terms of Herod's will, placing his son Herod Archelaus over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea to 6 CE. This region was referred to — by the Romans — as “The Tetrarchy of Judea”. However, at the request of the Jewish and Samaritan delegations, the Romans deposed Archelaus, made border changes, and created the “Iudaea province.” This enlarged province was ruled by a prefect (one of whom was Pilate) until the year 41. From 6–66 there were governors of the Judean province. Pilate was Prefect of Judea, 26–36.

So Herod's son Archelaus was out, but Herod had had three other sons, some of whom are mentioned in this Sunday's gospel reading. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Peraea and Galilee to 39 CE; and his brother Philip ruled areas both to the north and the east of the Jordan river. All of this indicates a step-down in power and

authority from that which Herod the Great had held. Tetrarch basically means “a petty prince” – a title which was little more than a plaything for reputation; albeit one that made the lives of some people miserable.

(Please, in the name of all that is good and holy, pour yourself more tea).

Luke’s mention of Lysanias is obscure – and has puzzled biblical historians. To be sure, there was a Lysanias, but he died in 36BCE. Others argue that Luke is making reference to the Lysanias mentioned by Josephus, and still others argue that Luke is saying who he thinks should have been ruler at the time, rather than who was installed at the time.

Luke mentions the High Priests too. The High Priests were another “in between” role. They came from among the Jewish people, but were appointed by Roman authorities. Annas served as High Priest from the year 6CE to 15. He was young — only 36 by the end of his time as High Priest. Yet he remained an important political character, aided by his five sons and his son-in-law Caiaphas (also mentioned in this gospel text).

(Interestingly, Annas and Caiaphas continue to be political actors in the life of Jesus in the writings of Luke, as well as in those of Matthew and John. — see Matt 26:3, 57; John 11:49, 18:13, 24, 28; Acts 4:6)

Back to Caesar Augustus — remember him? High-heejin of the Roman Empire. He died in 15CE he was succeeded by Tiberias Caesar, under whose reign Jesus was abducted and executed. The Herod of that era is portrayed somewhat passively (23:6–12) because by that stage, Judea is under Pilate — whose bloodthirsty character has been established (13:1). Jesus, a Galilean, who is making his way through the towns and villages (13:22) to Jerusalem must know that Jerusalem is not a safe place for Galileans.

(Is the tea finished? We’re almost done.)

Even this brief hop, skip and a jump through the political landscape of Luke’s gospel demonstrates the fact that the evangelist locates Jesus firmly within the context of contested territory, temporal powers, political machinations, despotic leadership and disputes about the rightful kings. That the gospel progresses in a political vein, moving towards the execution of Jesus as a pretender to the throne (23:2–5, 38) confirm to us that political reality is at the heart of the gospel of Luke, not a mere backdrop. The words of Zechariah’s song — that Jesus is set for the “rise and the fall of many in Israel!” — and Mary’s song — casting the mighty from thrones — each lay the foundation for a profoundly politically engaged gospel manuscript, a manuscript that sees the fall of an Empire, and the glorious inclusion of all in a universal song of salvation that will go from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Response

Today, in our own daily conversations, we make casual references to political realities: “in the campaign cycle of the general election...” or “in the first year of the leadership of...” or “during the controversy about...” or “the first century after

partition...”, using leaders’ names as a shorthand for an era of a particular political policy, or evil, or achievement, ambition or deception.

To read the text of Luke’s gospel is to be drawn to read the text of our own days — where political realities influence the everyday.

The gospel text calls all of us to be incarnate in our social, cultural, linguistic and political realities, and to search for the pathway of justice in these realities.

In light of the description of Luke’s political landscape, it may be of interest to groups to consider how they’d describe their own political landscape of today.

Prayer

God of time;
Time came from the words shaped by your mouth
and then you came into time
in the body of a child:
with a mouth, ears, eyes, legs, arms,
a heart beating,
a stomach aching for food,
and a brain aching for integrity.
In our own time,
give us the wisdom to discern
the signs fo the times,
so that we can respond
to the things that will make
life flourish
more and more.
Because you are the one
from whom all life comes
and with whom all life flourishes
more and more.
Amen.