

Year A, 2016  
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Christmas Eve  
St. Luke 2:1-20

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A pastor read his young daughter a bedtime story. When he finished she asked, “Daddy, was that a true story or were you just preaching?” St. Luke was preaching when he told us about the birth of Jesus. That doesn’t mean his story isn’t true. It is, in fact, truer than mere facts could ever be. It is more than true because he gives us not only the facts but the meaning. If all you want are facts, there are scholars who can do that for you, but they aren’t nearly as interesting or important as what Luke gives us.

St. Luke tells us the time and setting in history. It was during the reign of Caesar Augustus while Quirinius was governor of Syria. That tidbit of information sets up a narrative that is in direct competition with the storied birth of Emperor Augustus. “Augustus” means “the revered one.” Augustus was revered as the “son of a god” who brought a century of civil war to an end. He established the *Pax Romana*—the peace of Rome that was enforced by Roman armies through out the Roman world. Luke names out loud the governor who maintained and enforced that Roman peace in Galilee. And with that, he lays open and challenges the world in which he lived with the good news of a great joy that is come to the world—a new kingdom with a new ruler. St. Luke lays open the discrimination experienced by the Jews and the compromised allegiance demanded by the Romans. Luke wants to tell us that about the Son of God who will establish a new kingdom—the *Pax Christi*—a peace that is not enforced with spear and sword but by love and commitment. No matter what our experience, in what time or place we live, there is come a new kingdom among man with a God and Father who has the whole world in His hand.

Chapter two begins with a blast of royal trumpets: the Emperor has spoken and the governor will enforce his decree. Mary and Joseph and a host of other people start heading for their native homes to be counted in a census that will allow the Romans to tax them more efficiently. Every person was ordered back to his ancestral home. In the midst of that darkened and violent world there is another blast of royal trumpets: God’s army—that host of angels in the fields where the shepherds lay—who glorified God and announced this kingdom established for peace on earth

without resorting to the sword. What Augustus, “the revered one”, didn’t seem to realize was that his new competitor was about to grasp the hearts and minds of His people. Augustus could conquer the world, but he couldn’t capture the hearts and minds of a people. He ordered them back to their ancestral home. What the “revered one” didn’t seem to realize was that he was driving them back to the very source of their strength—their extended families. There’s nothing quite like coming home for Christmas, is there. It is the power of family ... it is the source of our strength—the foundation of who we are. And it binds us together more deeply than anything.

The Greek word, *kataluma*, is used twice by Luke—here and in chapter 22, verse 11. Here it is translated as “inn.” At the end of the Gospel it is translated as “guest room.” It can mean either. However, Bethlehem was only a small village not on a major trade route, so there would be no need for an inn, or hotel. Mary and Joseph arrived at the home of a family member. Because the census had everyone on the move, the guest room was already filled. No Middle Eastern person would ever turn away a family member. They would somehow make room. The family made room for Mary and Joseph in the stable portion of the home where the animals were brought in at night to be kept safe from attack or theft, sheltered and kept warm by their body heat. The newborn baby was laid in a feeding trough called a manger. You see, Christmas has always been about families. There, in the heart and mind, He establishes His kingdom of peace, love and commitment.

That boy-child of Mary was born in a stable,  
 a manger his cradle in Bethlehem.  
 Gift of the Father, to human mother,  
 makes him our brother of Bethlehem.

Enjoy your family and your church family at home for the holidays.  
 And have a blessed Christmas.