

When Quirinius was Governor of Syria...

Luke 2:1-20

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Midnight, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

“This was the first registration that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” These words have been spoken by countless children in Christmas programs around the world when they do their recitations of the Christmas account. Before those children were doing that pastors going back almost to the apostles themselves were reading or chanting those words to their congregations at Christmas Midnight. Some children say them with confidence and gusto showing off their pronunciation prowess. Other children stumble through the words because they cannot say them right. And some children say them as fast as they can hoping that no one will notice their flub up if there is one.

But what about these words? Quirinius is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. Why is he mentioned here? Quirinius did not do anything to bring about our Lord’s birth in Bethlehem. He is not like Caesar August who issued the decree that a registration should take place which gave the reason for Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem so that our Lord would be born where He was supposed to be born. He is not like Joseph watching over Mary and caring for her while she brought forth the Savior of the world. Why, even the shepherds are more in the know than Quirinius was. They know that the baby in the manger was the Christ. The shepherds know that the baby in the manger is the Lord Himself! They know that the baby in the manger is the Savior born to them. And they go around and tell everyone what they had heard and seen about the child! They are the first evangelists! And poor Quirinius sits up there in Syria doing his duty for the Roman emperor none the wiser that the world has been completely changed because God has become human and entered into His creation in humility to save it and restore it.

So why tell us about Quirinius? Why does the Holy Evangelist, Saint Luke, tell us that the registration that Caesar Augustus ordered which got Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so that Jesus would be born at the right place according to prophecy is the first registration that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria?

What Luke is doing is giving the date of our Lord’s birth. Some of the grammar is debated in some circles as to whether Luke’s Greek should be translated the first registration while Quirinius was governor of Syria or the registration that took place just before Quirinius was governor of Syria. It does not matter to us since we cannot correlate our calendars to ancient Roman calendars anyway. What does matter is that

Quirinius was a real person. Even now we can still read ancient Roman records about his governorship of Syria. The original readers of the Gospel of Luke would have remembered Quirinius being governor of Syria and would have known from what Luke told them when the birth of Jesus took place. It would be like us saying, "During the Eisenhower administration."

And this is necessary for Luke to do. It was necessary for him to do it when he wrote the Gospel. It is just as necessary for us today to read it, "This was the first registration that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria."

We live in a modern world. One thing modernity has imposed on us whether we wanted it to be imposed on us or not is the separation between public and private life. It has become so ingrained in us that there is a distinction between public and private life that the Supreme Court of our nation has even invented a "right to privacy." They say it is in the Constitution of the United States, but the Constitution does not use those words.

In this world in which we live some things are private. You keep them to yourself. You do not share them openly with the world. In fact in some cases it would be harmful for you to share them with the world. There are people out there who would use the information to harm you.

And then there are some things that are public. Where we go to work is public. Where we go to school is public. The financial dealings that we have with other people are somewhat public in that the people with whom we have the dealings must have the same understanding of the financial deal that we do because disagreements would be disruptive and lead to disputes and even lawsuits. But such agreements must not be known to everyone or others may take advantage of it.

Our marriages are public for the most part. Our children are public for the most part. The laws by which we live in the United States are public. Everyone knows them and everyone must abide by them.

And in this modern world where everything is divided into public and private religion is carefully placed into the private realm and it must never become public. In our modern world religion is anything that has to do with a belief in God. Since Luke in chapter two of his Gospel is recounting for us the account of how God became man and was born of a woman, modern people and modern civilization considers the incarnation of God to be private. It must not be allowed to affect public life in any way whatsoever.

And when we live in this modern world long enough, we start to think like the modern world thinks. Even though we go to church every Sunday we are bombarded by the modern world's assumptions that our religion is a private matter and not something that we should live by in the public. Pretty soon we start to live that way. We stop talking about Jesus in public. We listen to the account of the shepherds telling everyone about the birth of the Lord, the Savior, the Christ, and we think to ourselves that it was nice of the shepherds to do that, but those people who marveled at what the shepherds said were marveling because they did not believe the shepherds. We don't entertain the notion that they marveled because God had become flesh. We think that is something that they did back then and we do not do those things. And so we talk about Jesus less and less in public and frankly less and less even in private. We continue to go to church, but church has less and less to do with what we do in our daily lives. It becomes something that we have always done. It becomes a place of escape for some of us. It becomes a place to relive old memories that are pleasant from our childhood. But Jesus has nothing to do with how we vote, nothing to do with how we act in public, nothing to do with how we conduct business with other people. We do not think about Jesus when we are at the bank. We do not think about Jesus when we decide to have sex with someone. We do not think about Jesus when we are raising our children. We do not think about Jesus when we go to school or when we send our children to school. Modernity has fooled us into think that those things don't have anything to do with our faith and that our faith doesn't have anything to do with those things. We wind up living two different lives. One life we lead at church. The other life we lead the rest of the time. We do what we want most of the time. We do what Jesus wants only when we are at church.

And we need Quirinius and we need to know that he was governor of Syria when Jesus was born. We need this in order to combat Satan who has used modernity to fool us into thinking that Jesus has nothing to do with this world. We need Quirinius and his political reality. He really was a politician of the ancient Roman world. He really was governor of Syria. You can look up his dates in the Roman records or at least as close as the Romans or anyone could date him. There was a real politician in office in a real Roman province a long time ago in this very same world in which we are living who was in power when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem and the whole creation changed when God was born of Mary. He is the Lord. He is Christ.

And we need him not just so that we live the way that Jesus wants us to live. We need Quirinius to remind us that Jesus is part of the same world in which we are living because there is something about this world from which even modernity cannot rescue

us. That is to say that in this world, the real world, the world that we are living in, there is a hole in the ground that will bear our names. There is a cancer or a car accident waiting for us on a certain date in our future and we will die and that will be the end of us. Our cars, our homes, our politicians, our social workers, our therapists, will remember us no more. Our cats and our dogs will not remember us. And even those people who loved us will have memories that will fade because eventually they will succumb to death also and then we will really be gone. There is a heart attack waiting for us. There is senility and old age waiting for us. There is a blood clot or aneurism waiting for us. Something will get us because we are sinners and the wages of sin is death. And there is nothing in the world that modernity can do for you. Modern science with evolution and medicine and good exercise and right living cannot save you from the wages of your sin. Modern philosophy which is really just ancient ideas regurgitated over and over again cannot save you. Social revolutions cannot save you. Even if we lived in a social justice utopia, you would still die. There is nothing to save you. It is the wages of your sin.

Such wages are suitable because your sins are real. Modernity has fooled you into believing that your sins are simply private matters. You don't actually sin in public. But that is a lie from Satan. You do sin in public. You do run down people who are close to you. You do cheat your neighbors. You have cheated them. You have committed fornication and are committing it. You ignore the commandments of God. You have committed adultery or are committing it. You have committed murder or at least wished someone dead or were relieved when they died. You have insulted your family members and treated them shamefully. You have not taught your children the truth of the Gospel or forgiven them as God has directed you. You have come to church and given lip service to God and then entered into the world, into the public, and lived however you wanted. Your sins are quite real. They are not private matters. They are not merely matters of the heart although they begin there. They are not the private judgments of a God who will keep things between you and Him. They have been committed against others and you have harmed others in the real world. They have been committed against God and He is as real as death. And so since your sins are real the wages of your sins is also real: death.

This is why we need Quirinius. This is why Luke tells us that he was governor of Syria when Jesus was born. It is to let us know that Jesus did not come to some kind of fantasy world when He was born. Jesus did not enter into some kind of philosophical or theological construct when He was born. He was not born into some kind of private

cosmos that we can only talk about within the walls of a church or within the walls of our home never to be spoken of in public.

Jesus was born in this world. He was born in the same world in which you have committed your sins and lived in your sin. He was born in the same world that has a hole in the ground with your name on it. He was born into the world of your death.

He was baptized in the real world. He walked about and taught what He taught in the real world. The arguments that He had with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes and the elders of the people were not arguments about high browed theological issues that someone like Quirinius would be unaffected. He was arguing with them about salvation from the death and the sin that grasps us. He was arguing for our salvation from the death.

And since your sins are real, His cross is real. He was not crucified in some virtual reality. He was not crucified in some artificial private realm invented by modern jurisprudence and philosophy. He was nailed to wood. Blood came from the wounds from the nails. Real water and real blood flowed from His side when the soldier pierced Him with the spear. His death was real, just as real as your sins in order to pay for them all.

And all of this means that His resurrection was real. His resurrection is not a parable designed to make only a theological point about the faith of the apostles or our faith or whatever. His resurrection is not a fairy tale invented to calm a bunch of people as they face their graves and their inevitable demise. His resurrection was as real as His death, as real as the life that you are living right now. His resurrection recreated the whole world. He made it new because now death is showing that it is not the final word. It is not the final breath. Death is defeated. It cannot hold Him and therefore cannot hold anyone baptized into Him or anyone who consumes His body and blood or His word and those things are just as real as He is.

This is your savior. This is your salvation. It is as real as the grave and hell from which He has saved you. It is as real as the new creation to which He shall take you.

And all of this salvation in the real world got started when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

In the Name of Jesus. Blessed Christmas.