

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
Christmas Day**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian [**MIDD-ee-ann**]. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.³

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius⁴ [**sigh-REE-knee-uss**] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (be-

cause he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto

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¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 9: 2-7 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 2: 1-20 (KJV).

⁴ Better: Quirinius, as the RSV has it.

⁵ St. Luke 2: 4-5 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 2: 14 (KJV).

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the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✕ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The home in which I was reared was, at least outwardly, not a particularly religious one. My mother had been brought up an Episcopalian, that is, as a member of the official Lambeth Anglican franchise in the United States. Of course, that was more than a generation before there was any need to distinguish between Lambeth Anglicanism and authentic Anglicanism; in the 1920s, it was all one.

As I discovered after I became involved with the Anglican Catholic Church, my mother always thought of herself as a traditional Episcopalian, that is, as an old fashioned Anglican, and was attached to the old Faith and the old services. She used to come joyfully to church with me whenever she was visiting me in New Orleans and happily joined in the old services of the Book of Common Prayer that was familiar to her from her girlhood.

My father was brought up a Unitarian, of the old New England persuasion, that is, in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the lovely church on Concord Green, rather than the modern Universalist one. So my parents reached the customary compromise in such a “mixed” marriage: they stayed away from both their childhood churches.

Nor, for some reason unknown to me, did they choose some neutral third alternative body in which to carry on their family’s religious life. I was the only one of their children who had been baptized as a baby and that was because my parents had taken me as a toddler to visit my mother’s parents. During that visit, my grandparents had me

baptized in their little church in Illinois. (I later baptized my own brother as a necessary prelude to my celebrating his wedding, both of which are among the nicer privileges of being a priest.)

I have absolutely no idea why my sister was not baptized with me, for she must have been present, unless she, being a few years older than I, was at that time enjoying a special visit with my paternal grandparents. In any case, that sole occasion, of which I have no memory whatever, was the beginning and the end of my involvement with the Episcopal Church, or with any other liturgical church during my formative years.

We did not attend church as a family, and by “not attend” I mean “not ever”. I have no childhood memory of ever being in a church building for the purpose of public worship. We did not even say grace at mealtimes. The only time I can recall either of my parents’ going to church – without the children, needless to say – is when my maternal grandmother would come from Illinois to stay with us in Ohio; then, on Sundays, my mother would take her the nine miles to the Episcopal Church in our county seat.

Now, of course, I bitterly regret the lost opportunity to have been reared in, and to have come to know, the grand old Episcopal Church as it was prior to its decay in the 1960s and ‘70s, and which I have had a glimpse only through the eyes of the many former Episcopalians whom I have met in the ACC. But that was not to have been.

However, we must return to my theme. Despite what must seem to have been stony soil indeed for any religious seeds that might have been cast onto it, somehow we three children grew up with a consciousness that we were, or at least were supposed to be, Christians, and that the essential Christian message is set out in the Holy Bible. A big part of this understanding was created by something my father did

with us children every Christmas and which, I suspect, his father, my grandfather, had in his turn done every Christmas with my father and his siblings.

Each Christmas my father would call the three of us to him and we would sit on the living room couch with him, on his lap or beside him. Then he would say, “I am going to read you the Christmas Story”. He would take the Bible and read from it the first part of the second Chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, the portion that is the Second Lesson appointed for Morning Prayer today.

Conclusion:

So every time I hear those ringing words, “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed,” I am instantly transported back to my childhood, sitting on that couch beside my father, sister, and brother, and watching a cheering fire burning in the fireplace across from us.

And by the time we are reminded that Cyrenius [sigh-REE-knee-uss] (actually Quirinius [queer-EE-knee-uss]) was the governor of Syria who had the responsibility for conducting Octavian’s census in Palestine, and I begin to accompany Joseph on his search for accommodation for the night, I am completely in the Christmas mood. All the happy excitement of childhood returns to lift my spirits and remind me that, in the most important ways, all is right with the world because God is caring for it.

Then I, like the shepherds, feel like joining the angels in proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”⁶

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