

THE MESSIANIC PROGRAM OF JESUS CHRIST

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness”.

(Luke 3: 1, 2)

The Gospel proclaims the birth of Christ as being of “cosmic” significance, that is of world-wide, global, importance. Does it not say that God so loved the *world* that He gave His only-begotten Son (John 3: 16)?

It seems, however, that after the birth of Christ nothing really changes. The Jews do not know that their Messiah has been born. The world just keeps on rotating despite the birth of the King of kings. Jesus and his family live in Nazareth, leading a life as simple and unknown people.

Time goes on. Kings die, and their thrones are taken by others. Power struggles take place, as always, and there are political changes. New rulers rise to power; new names become famous. The name of Christ, the Messiah, the son of David does not play any role. After the grandeur of Christmas, life goes on in the world without Christ.

Is the passage at hand not an impressive list of worldly names? Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas. Quite a gathering of nobles, worth a lot of money. Emperors, kings, aristocrats, with a mighty monopoly on world power. What effect will God’s initiative in Christ have on this worldly conglomerate of wealth and influence?

There is one more name in this text. We read, “. . .the Word of God came to John the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. . .” John, son of Zechariah. Luke introduces him with a bit of pride and pathos: and then along came John! Is this God’s answer to the apparent monopoly of Satan and the world? But this John is nothing more than a desert hermit: what will he be able to do that has any influence on world events?

Well, John the Baptist is called out of desert seclusion to herald the appearing of the Messiah, and to proclaim the evangelical plan-of-action of Christ in the courts of kings and throughout the land. The world, with all its aristocracy and nobles, will never be the same again. We see here how God unveils the messianic program of Jesus Christ in the calling of John the Baptist. This messianic program deals with the united nations of Rome, the divided kingdom of David, and the deformed priesthood of Aaron.

PROPHETIC HISTORY

As you no doubt know, Luke is writing his Gospel to a Roman nobleman, called Theophilus, to convince him of the world-wide significance of the Christ. It is no wonder, scholars explain, that Luke painstakingly gives a set of dates and a list of names which would be of special interest to Theophilus. Therefore, they say, Luke writes, “In the fifteenth year of Tiberius. . .,” etc. He wanted to be historically exact. But, some conclude, you really cannot “preach” on this text, because it is non-essential. It would be a historical survey of little significance to the congregation of Christ.

However, we should realize that Luke’s way of writing history is, at the least, remarkable. He writes in a different manner than any other historian, for he is

writing prophetically. This means that he gives these names and dates in their relation to God and to Christ's program of action.

At the end of verse 2 we read, "And the Word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. . . ." You may call that the climax, the whole point of these verses. Everything is related to it. God calls His spiritual child, John, out of the seclusion of the desert to a public office, to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, the King of kings, not only locally, in Judea, but as John himself says, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (verse 6). When John is called, he has a divine message first for the Jews, but this same message will affect kings and princes everywhere. Indeed, all flesh will be confronted with the kingdom of God.

John is the herald of Christ, who announces His plan of action for this world. If you know this, you look at the list of names in a different light.

ROME'S GOLDEN ERA

Is it not an ironic beginning? "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. . .," Luke writes. Jesus Christ was born under the emperor Augustus, who has already made way for Tiberius. But meanwhile Christ has passed into oblivion, hidden away in the hills of Galilee. The real power in Palestine belongs to the Roman emperor, who lives in a pompous palace and is surrounded by special brigades.

Tiberius has been emperor now for fifteen years already. This is a significant point. It means that his throne is well-established and his power firmly fixed. When a new ruler is in the process of coming to power, there are always conflicts and opportunities for change. There is an unstable situation then, from which others – perhaps Christ? – could profit. But God does not wish to profit from the world's instability. His Word comes to John in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, when the emperor rules unopposed and when Rome has come to its "golden era." Hardly ever was an empire so wide-spread, so well-governed, and so well-equipped for world dominion as Rome under Tiberius. Here is the peak of Roman power and might.

If you take a brief look at the history of the Roman empire, you note the following. Under Julius Caesar the empire was founded; he was the victorious general who made the mighty conquests. Yet politically, Julius Caesar could not bring stability; he was assassinated. Under Octavianus Augustus the empire was strengthened; he was the keen politician who settled the internal feuds. And now under Tiberius Caesar the empire has been *consolidated*; he is the undisputed head of state and ruler of the kings of the earth.

Under Tiberius Caesar the imperial-Roman economy started to bloom. The famous system of roads, necessary for trade and commerce, was perfected throughout the empire. Foreign policy was carefully planned, and all resistance to Rome in outlying areas crushed. Tiberius consolidated the famous "pax Romana," the peace of Rome: the unity of all nations under one king. And in his fifteenth year, it had all been achieved: there was one mighty, united empire under the only sovereign ruler, Tiberius.

EMPEROR WORSHIP

It need not surprise us one bit that this Tiberius demanded divine reverence and worship as the head of humanity and as the mediator between the “gods” and the people. Everywhere, throughout the empire, children were taught to worship the emperor. Their parents offered weekly sacrifices of incense to their lord and master in Rome. This man had created a religious cult around his person. His imperial decree was divine truth. His will was divine law. His touch meant blessing and health. His anger meant instant death. That is how it was in those days.

Do we see, then, what Luke is telling us? The Lord calls John, but he is not called to operate in some chaotic situation and to use the unstable political climate as an opportunity for revolution. John is not called to organize revolution, but to proclaim reformation, that is, a return to the true religion, to the real relationship to the Living God, to the real peace. John is to proclaim, not the lasting glory of the “pax Romana,” but the breakthrough of the “pax Christi,” the peace of Christ.

Theophilus must learn to appreciate the plan of action of Jesus Christ, who does not overrun the world in its weakest moments but calls it to reformation in its times of greatest strength. When the civilized world is at its peak and when the nations are united under Rome, when Rome is strong, it is asked to measure its empire against the Kingdom of God, and see if the peace of Rome can withstand the peace of Christ.

THE REAL DECLINE AND FALL

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius, John receives his call in the desert. And that means that there and then the real decline and fall of the Roman empire begins. World government is now being claimed and realized by the true King of kings, Jesus Christ. The real prince of peace is proclaimed, and His plan-de-campagne to unite the nations under His power and to rule from sea to sea is revealed. He begins the process of establishing a world-wide realm of peace and prosperity for His people.

That process continues today, and its progress is proclaimed to us every Sunday. The Kingdom of God continues to make its way into this world, but where is the empire of Tiberius Caesar? Christ is seated on the throne, at the right hand of God, but Tiberius is long gone. God is still worshipped throughout the world, but where is the divine reverence for the Roman emperors? The united nations of Rome could not stand when confronted with the Kingdom of Heaven. In the end, the Roman empire could only serve the proclamation of the Name of Christ. For God will use the mighty empires of this world to serve His purpose: the gathering of the Church of Christ.

A PERMANENT CRISIS ZONE

Despite his claim to divinity, Tiberius cannot be everywhere at the same time. He cannot oversee everything, especially not in the distant colonies, but must

delegate authority to others. And Roman politicians developed a very effective policy. We should know the procedure, for it helps us to understand the Gospel.

The policy was as follows. Relatively quiet areas received or retained a king or ruler out of their own people. The idea was: keep the people content by assigning them their own rulers, collect taxes via their own government, and people won't have the idea that they are under occupation. As long as these countries paid their taxes to Rome and cooperated in the affairs of the empire, they were relatively independent. This was a policy which the Romans had copied from the Persian King Cyrus.

The restless areas, the so-called "permanent crisis zones," were placed under direct Roman rule by means of occupying troops commanded by a military governor or proconsul, who sent monthly reports to Rome and was authorized to use force to maintain the peace and collect the taxes.

This helps us understand the situation in Palestine, which was one of those "permanent crisis zones." For a long time, the entire area was ruled by one man, Herod the Great. He displayed the brutal forcefulness required to keep the area relatively quiet. But when Herod the Great died, his descendants fought among each other for power. Therefore the Romans divided Palestine into four smaller sections (and that explains the word "tetrarch" in our text: ruler over one-fourth) and set a tetrarch over each section.

Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, ruled in the South (Judea), Philip in the North (Ituraea and Trachonitis), Herod Antipas in the central area (Samaria and Galilee), and the rest (the present Syria) was given to a certain Lysanias, the son of a Roman general.

DAVID DIVIDED

It is important to note that the southern area (Judea, governed by Archelaus) remained an area of conflict and uprising, and that Archelaus despite much bloodshed could not keep the area under control. It was this violent and unstable situation which prompted Joseph and Mary to resettle in Nazareth after coming out of Egypt (Matthew 2:22). The Romans finally tired of the situation, deposed Archelaus, placed Judea under direct rule, and sent governors from Rome. Pontius Pilate was already the fifth governor to try his hand at keeping Judea under Roman power.

Meanwhile, the important point is that Palestine was completely divided under Roman authority. It is remarkable that Luke describes the entire area of Old Israel, the previous kingdom of David and Solomon. This is Israel as it was in its golden age. By including the entire area of the old kingdom, Luke shows the pathetic situation of the heritage of David. It is politically divided into four parts, either under direct Roman supervision or under Edomite rule. Religiously, there is much internal division, and there are all kinds of parties. And economically the country is being exploited for the Romans and the rich.

Notice that while the world is relatively quiet – “the pax Romana” rules – the former kingdom of David suffers chaos, division, disunity. Is this not a very strong contrast?

A WORLD UNITED – A CHURCH DIVIDED

May we not say here that the world is strong and united because the church is weak and divided? The world knows of peace and rest because it is able to divide and rule over the people of God. The world can only profit from a divided church.

Remember the situation when this whole area was united under the throne of David. It was the complete opposite then: the world around Israel was weak and had to pay taxes to Israel. And the whole area of Israel was “holy land,” the inheritance of God’s people, which received prosperity and peace from the LORD. In the days of Solomon, people came from far to see the glory of Israel and to hear the Word of Israel’s God.

But now Israel is a mockery among the nations. Its cities are mostly ruins. Its people are exploited and oppressed. The sheep are without a shepherd. A country is without a king who loves his people from the heart. Luke shows us this sad scene: the church is broken, and the united nations of Rome have no respect for the messianic kingdom of David.

THIS LAND IS HIS LAND

Why does Luke show us this? Because the Word of God, unveiling the program of Christ, deals with the divided kingdom of David. Is Jesus Christ not the Son of David, heir to the throne of His father, and will He not reunite His scattered nation and restore the one service of the LORD? This is an essential part of the prophecy of John the Baptist: Israel, get ready to receive your King, to greet your Messiah, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

I want you to notice how our Lord Jesus Christ started in the high north, in Galilee, and wandered the hills of Syria. He travelled down to Samaria, through the area of Herod Antipas, walked the countryside of Judea, and searched the barren deserts of the southern Negev, where Satan tempted Him. He travelled this whole land from north to south and from east to west, and He searched out all the people. He entered into the pain of His people to deliver them from their need and unite them before God His Father.

He does this because He is King of kings and, unlike Tiberius, Son of God. First and foremost He does it because He is the Son of David, Head of the Church, who came to His people like a shepherd to His flock. He came to His own, and how did it hurt Him to discover that His own would not accept Him. But even then, He continued and would not be stopped in His campaign. Nor will He be stopped today. He will gather the true Israel and call the nations to take their place with the children of Abraham. He will gather His church despite all attempts to have it destroyed. He will unify His church in the one true faith despite all attempts to

keep it divided. He Himself will as the only High Priest deliver His people from their sins and make them a people holy unto the Lord.

IMPOSTER PRIESTS

Luke mentions two more names, of which Theophilus had perhaps never heard, but which are nevertheless important: the call to John came in the days of the “high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.” Luke does not just speak of the political but also of the ecclesiastical situation.

You immediately notice that something is dreadfully wrong here. It says: the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, two of them; although the Law of Moses permitted only one high priest, who fulfilled his office until he died and was succeeded by his son.

That is no longer the case here. The right of inheritance has been rejected. Annas was not Caiaphas’ father but his father-in-law. And Caiaphas was not high priest alone, but they fulfilled this function together. In name it was Caiaphas, but in reality it was Caiaphas and his family who ruled the church.

When imposter-kings sit on the throne of David, that is bad! But when imposter-priests serve in the house of God, that is worse! The church is at the mercy of false shepherds, dominated by a family hierarchy which has deformed itself into a political and religious ruling class. The high-priestly family acts as royalty and lives in a palace!

Imagine a true priest living in a palace. It is noteworthy that Annas was a rich man, a capitalist who profited from both the temple tax and the imperial tax; a shrewd businessman whose company was called “church and state – business and politics.” No wonder that Annas and Caiaphas later *have* to get rid of Jesus; He threatens their influence and affluence. This high-priestly clique reasons like the policy-makers in Rome: keep the people busy with a legalistic religion of self-salvation, and also, keep them religiously divided, so that your power is not endangered.

UNCARING HIERARCHY

That is the worst thing here. It is not ideal to live under a foreign emperor, but Tiberius is at least far away in Rome. The country is sorely divided, but at least everyone knows what to expect from the local rulers. But when the church is in the grip of hierarchy and when there is spiritual oppression, that is terrible. When the church is torn apart and exploited from the inside, is that not the worst of all evils?

For then the truth is held under, the faith is destroyed, and the church ceases to show forth the marks of the true church of God. When the offices are deformed, the whole church is weakened, and heresies creep in. If the church is governed by a self-serving family clique, an aristocratic hierarchy, then spiritual slavery replaces the treasures of the covenant.

Here in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the low point of Aaron’s

priesthood has been reached. Israel now, if ever, needs a *new High Priest*. Do you notice how God is preparing to shove this deformed priesthood aside to give Israel its new High Priest after the order of Melchizedek? That is John's calling: as son of Levi, as priest after the order of Aaron, to proclaim the great High Priest, Jesus Christ.

HE FACED THEM ALL

If you sum all this up, you see Jesus Christ emerging here as King of kings, seated on the throne of David, and as the only High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek. In these two verses is unveiled the whole messianic program of Christ: to oppose the united world of man, to restore the divided people of God, to depose a deformed clergy, and to become Himself the true shepherd of His flock!

The great names Luke listed, our Lord knew them all. He faced the power of Rome when He stood before Pontius Pilate. He endured the mockery of Herod Antipas. He withstood the accusations of Annas and Caiaphas. He knew them all, He faced them all, and He overcame them all.

Today this Christ is in glory, as King of kings, and as head of His church, guiding our lives and the world's history to the goal of perfection. For the messianic program unveiled in this passage of Scripture will be completed. Then Christmas will have reached its conclusion.