

A NEW LIFE FROM A STABLE

By Rev Dev Anandarajan

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Luke 2: 1-7

My maternal grandmother was a great storyteller and a lady of immense wisdom. Life's struggles had imparted a wisdom that books rarely give. She has narrated many stories to me which I carry and still ponder.

She was in Malaya during the Second World War, where my grandfather ministered as a Methodist minister in Seremban. In narrating the birth stories of her children, one story always stood out. It was the birth of her seventh child.

When telling the story she would always talk about the Japanese occupation of Malaya and the difficult times they had to endure. My uncle was born during the War and she had a very hard and anxious time as there were no hospital facilities. They had to call a friend, who helped to deliver the baby at home.

For my grandmother, it is not just his birth but the political context in which he was born that was important. She would wonder if it had any effect on his life. It was a story of survival, a story of God's grace. The war between the two imperial powers - the British and the Japanese - and the subsequent occupation of Malaya by the Japanese had a significant impact on the lives my mother and her siblings in their formative years.

Luke tells us that Emperor Augustus had decreed a census needed to be taken and all had to register their names in their hometown. During that time Quirinius was Governor of Syria.

Luke places the narrative of Jesus and his followers into the broader context of Roman/Judaeen politics, in part by appropriating the literary conventions of historiographic prose. The events immediately before Jesus's conception are described as occurring "in the days of Herod, king of Judaea" (Lk 1.5) and Jesus's birth is placed in the time of the first census ordered by Caesar Augustus "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Lk 2:1-2).

From the start, readers are reminded of the political circumstance of early first century Judaea, ruled by the Herodians, a Judaised Idumean dynasty that has come to power through the patronage of Rome, profiting directly from the rise of Roman military influence in the region.

The formidable influence of the Romans is marked in Luke's text by the imposed power of taxation conveyed by the census and by the presence of a Roman governor (and thus the threat of Roman military forces) in the neighbouring province of Syria.

Emperor Augustus was Emperor of Rome from 27 BC to 14 AD till his death. He was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He is considered to be the founder of the Roman Empire. During his reign he enlarged the empire. Augustus's power was based on the exercise of a predominant military power and the ultimate sanction of his authority was force.

The Jews already hated their pagan conquerors, and censuses were forbidden under Jewish law. The assessment was greatly resented by the Jews. According to Josephus, the census triggered the revolt of Judas of Galilee and the formation of the party of the Zealots.

Given the above political climate, Jesus was born during a time of political unrest. The Imperial Rome would have used all its might to see through the census. There would have been internal opposition from militant quarters to boycott it. It is in this volatile political context that Joseph and Mary make the trip to Bethlehem. It is into this very explosive political climate Mary gives birth to Jesus.

What gets missed in the birth narrative amidst the angels, shepherds and the miraculous birth is the anxiety, fear and uncertainty the parents of Jesus faced in their effort to give him a safe birth. All odds were against them. They were not in their familiar neighbourhood where they could ask for help. Bethlehem was not their hometown. It was not the place they had chosen to settle down. They were there by force due to an imperial edict.

Added to this is the shame of an unwed young girl who had conceived and the man betrothed to her showing compassion to safeguard her from the shame. I wonder if Joseph took Mary away from Nazareth, the community in which she had grown up, to guard her from the suspicion and ill tongue of the community.

Would Joseph and Mary have told such stories to Jesus? About the trek to Bethlehem from Nazareth to present themselves for the census so that the Imperial Rome could collect taxes from their subjects; their desperateness in finding a place to stay, the anxiety of birthing their first born in unhealthy conditions? What impact this story, his own experience and that of his community under an occupying foreign force may have had on the young Jesus as he was growing up? Will it have shaped his thinking, attitude and critique of the Roman empire and his culture?

In recalling the story, Luke tells us when Jesus was born Imperial Rome was already a threat to his birth. It was not something Jesus encountered during his ministry. He was born within it and had to endure the harsh realities of it. But his birth as his death subverted the power of Rome. This was possible because Joseph and Mary were willing to make life possible. They were willing to wade through the cultural and political storms that threatened them, with determination, compassion and hope to birth a new life.

When I read stories and news in the media of Syrian parents taking the treacherous journey across the seas to find new life and give a new future for their children I am reminded of the Christmas story. They do what Joseph and Mary did. They get on those unworthy vessels to sail the stormy seas with determination, compassion and a fragile hope to find new life. If only they could be given at least a stable they would avail of the opportunities to birth new life – a new beginning.

May we hear the gospel story of God's subverting power in the Christmas story. The powers that deny possibilities of new life will one day be subverted by such lives that have been nurtured by compassion, determination and grace. For they will offer new hope so that life is made possible to all – as the one born in Bethlehem offered new life.

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