

I appeal to Caesar
Bible reading: Acts 25.13-27



“You have appealed to Caesar: to Caesar you shall go.” Acts 25.12

Splendour of Rome and local authority, working on policy with furrowed head,
 Joined to locate Messiah’s nativity – just where the prophets had already said!

*Sing all ye taxmen, dance the commissioners,
 Sing civil servants and policemen too:
 God in his mercy uses the government,
 God on his birthday had a need of you.*

That’s the only carol I know (in fact the only hymn I know) that mentions civil servants! (Maybe that’s why I like it – my Dad was a civil servant.) It’s part of a modern Christmas carol (sung to ‘The Keel Row’), where each verse celebrates the ordinary people — shepherds, midwives, innkeepers — who got involved when Jesus was born:

When God Almighty came to be one of us, masking the glory of his golden train:
 Dozens of plain things kindled by accident, and they will never be the same again.

*Sing all ye midwives, dance all the carpenters,
 Sing all the innkeepers and shepherds too:
 God in his mercy uses the commonplace —
 God on his birthday had a need of you.*

I’ve lost the book where I found it, and I can’t remember the author’s name — but I love the way it goes through the Christmas story and gradually everyone gets stirred into the mix. Even the wise men (‘science or fancy, learned or laughable’) have a place in God’s plan. It reminds me of Evelyn Waugh’s meditation by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, on the wise men: “How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by such outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts! ... Yet you came, and were not turned away. You too found room

at the manger. Your gifts were not needed, but they were accepted and put carefully by, for they were brought with love. In the new order of charity that had just come to life, there was room for you too. You were not lower in the eyes of the holy family than the ox or the ass.”

That’s part of the appeal of the Gospel stories — ordinary people, shepherds and fishermen, finding a place in God’s purposes. Somehow, we find that world easier to identify with than the world of civil servants and government offices. We long for simplicity. And yet — we live and work in a complex world. We have to deal with bureaucracy, with officials, with form-filling and regulations and all the paraphernalia of officialdom. We travel in cars, not on donkeys. Most of us work (when we can get there) in offices, not fields. Even the simple, homely tasks like shopping and talking to the grandchildren are now invaded by computers and passwords. But we’re still in God’s world! — and those complex worlds of work and politics need our prayers too — now, more than ever.

Luke’s story is very much rooted in history. This isn’t some timeless fairytale (“Once upon a time ...”). It’s about real people, living at a particular time in history — people whose lives are dominated by complex political forces outside their control (just like us). It’s Luke who links Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem with the tax-plans of the emperor Caesar Augustus in Rome (Luke 2.1). And now at the end of the story, here is Paul, bogged down in bureaucracy, stuck in prison for two years (Acts 24.27), waiting for his case to be resolved one way or another. A new governor (Festus) has arrived, with a flurry of activity (25.1-6). Maybe he’ll blow the dust off the old case-files — hold a judicial review, clear the backlog. That’s what he wants to do — and the easiest way is to shunt Paul off to another jurisdiction in Jerusalem. But Paul has a promise: “Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome” (23.11). And he knows his rights as a Roman citizen. The appeal to Caesar is the crucial lever to break the bureaucratic stranglehold and send him spinning off to Rome.

Legal procedures, Roman officials, political shenanigans behind the scenes — it all seems a far cry from Jesus preaching beside the sea of Galilee (Luke 5.1-11). But the two are only a few miles apart — they’re part of the same world. (Some have suggested that it was while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea that Dr Luke took the opportunity to visit Galilee and do the research for the first part of his two-volume story — which is a lovely idea, even if we can’t prove it!) The cosmopolitan, urban world of Caesarea was a world where Paul felt at home, where he had begun his great work of planting churches across the cities of the Mediterranean — and he knew that that world needed to hear the message of Jesus just as much as the villages of Galilee. And if he was now stuck in the corridors of Roman power — well, that was part of God’s world too. If God wanted him to be there, then God would enable him to witness to Jesus there. The stage is set for the last great set-piece speech of Acts (ch.26) — when Paul gets the chance to make his defence in front of the Roman governor and the last of the Herods, the representative of the Jewish people worldwide. And (as Anna and the Sunday School reminded us in a brilliant piece of on-line theatre on Sunday) — “It’s all about Jesus. You’ve got to change the way you think about Jesus.” And the church just keeps on growing!

God bless, Loveday.