

THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN

Meditation, The Nativity of Jesus Christ

December 25, 2022

Last night we read the familiar words of the prophet Isaiah, *"Unto us a child has been born, unto us a son has been given."* With words similar to these, a messenger had once raced into the Roman Senate and announced, *"Unto us a child has been born, the next ruler of the world!"* That took place sixty-six years before the birth of Jesus Christ. In an aristocratic community of Rome, a child had indeed been born; a son had indeed been given. His name was Gaius Octavius, and he was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar. Those of you who know your history know Julius Caesar had no sons, so Octavius would go on to be his adopted son and heir. Octavius grew up in the palace, educated by the finest teachers of the empire in literature, philosophy, and government. At the age of eighteen (!) he ascended the throne of Rome after the March 15, 44 BC murder of Julius Caesar.

The repercussions of the assassination of Julius Caesar helped plunge the Roman empire into chaos. Fifteen years after ascending the throne, at the age **thirty-three**, Gaius Octavius finally secured the blessings of peace, stability and order throughout the vast Roman Empire, initiating the era known as the **Pax Romana** (*the Roman Peace*); this adopted son of Julius Caesar was then given the unofficial title "Prince of Peace." Also that year, when he was thirty-three years old, the Roman Senate conferred upon Octavius the title "Caesar Augustus," which means "Caesar, the Exalted One." His full official title was *"Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus."* The "Divi Filius" portion means "Son of the Divine" (*two years after his murder, Julius Caesar was acknowledged as a divinity via "apotheosis," which is the term for the elevation of someone to divine status*). Now, as the uncontested ruler of the entire Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus, the Prince of Peace, the Son of the Divine, just had to give the word and armies would march, ships would sail, and the world would move for him. Which is exactly what happened when he was sixty-six years of age ... when he was sixty-six, he decreed a census be taken of the entire Roman world. By his mandate, everyone was to return to their home towns for this census to be counted with their families of origin. That should sound familiar to you, for that census is recorded in the Gospel according to Luke, chapter two.

As Luke records for us, Caesar Augustus sent out a decree *"... that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."* Everyone was required to go back to their home towns to register for this census. It was during this census that another child was born, another son was given, in a rather un-aristocratic village, in a rather unimportant corner of the Empire. No messenger ran to the Roman Senate to announce this child's birth. Instead, it was God's angelic messenger who announced the birth of Jesus Christ to the some of the least privileged of the Empire's inhabitants, a small band of shepherds who were out watching their flocks by night: *"I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord."* This other child began His life in a manger, which is a feeding trough for cows and sheep. He was not raised in a palace, but in a common Jewish home. He was not educated by the finest teachers in the Empire in literature, philosophy and government; he was educated in carpentry. And at age thirty-three, His thirty-third year, He, too, secured the blessings of peace for His people not by ascending to a Roman throne, but to a Roman cross. In that ultimate act of sacrifice, Jesus revealed Himself as the King of a whole new kingdom that has long outlived and will continue to outlive every earthly empire. To this very day, He just has to give the word and His hope and salvation can break into any life in the world. That's what we proclaim at Advent and celebrate at Christmas! There is a Savior King who is the *true* Prince of Peace, the true Son of God, the true Augustus, Exalted One. Emmanuel, God With Us. He has come. He will save. And He will come again.

The Man Who Would Be King is a short novel written by Rudyard Kipling written in 1888. In 1975 it was adapted into a film by the same title, starring Sean Connery, Michael Caine and Christopher Plummer (*which I rented and re-watched this week*). Without going into great detail, the essential plot involves two British officers in India, two men with a thirst for adventure, who decide to resign from the Army and travel to Kafiristan, a remote part of Afghanistan where no white man had set foot since the days of Alexander the Great. Through a chain of events, Sean Connery winds up being treated as a deity, and is crowned as the God-king of Kafiristan. It all quickly unravels when the people discover he is not a deity, but you'll have to rent the movie or read the book yourself to get those details.

The Man Who Would Be King wittingly or unwittingly follows a classic recurrent historical theme, a theme that goes back to the Garden of Eden, and that recurrent theme is this: HUMAN HISTORY IS CROWDED WITH PEOPLE WHO ASPIRE TO BE GODS. I received a remarkable Christmas card years ago: On the cover were portraits of Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Pharaoh Rameses, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse Tung. Below these pictures was this caption: "HISTORY IS CROWDED WITH MEN WHO WOULD BE GOD ... "

Open the card, and there is a picture of the nativity, the Baby in the manger, and this caption which completes the sentence begun on the cover ... "BUT ONLY ONE GOD WOULD BE MAN."

Today we celebrate the story of The King Who Would be Man ... The High King of Heaven Who exchanged His throne for a feeding trough. The Creator became the created, and the Source of all wisdom and knowledge was born into poverty and lived without earthly wealth and luxury. The King of Kings willingly subjected Himself to all of what it means to be human -- pain, hunger, thirst, sorrow, physical exhaustion and the full range of human emotions -- and in an act of selfless, sacrificial love, THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN died on our behalf, offering mercy and grace to us, the ones who do not deserve it. The wonder of Christmas is that THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN stooped to accomplish our salvation, the God of the universe stepped down from eternity to intervene in human history and save those wholly unable to save themselves. At the core of our faith is this assertion that Jesus, this true Son of the Divine, the real Prince of Peace, this Exalted One, is indeed God in the Flesh, Emmanuel, God With Us. He is the King Who Would Be Man.

We talk about God sending Jesus into our world, but it might be a bit clearer to say that *God Himself came to us in Jesus*. As John tells us, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us; we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth."* Full of grace and truth. Because we need Grace; we need forgiveness and a fresh start. And we also need Truth; we need to be guided and taught as to how to live well, how to live fully, how to live as God designed us to live. We need Grace, we need Truth; we need Jesus ... the true Son of the Divine, the true Prince of Peace, the true Augustus, Exalted One, the God in the flesh Who, full of Grace and Truth, enters into the arena of our lives to give us life abundant and eternal. We celebrate the birth of THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN.

O come, let us adore Him. Let us affirm our faith together:

THE NATIVITY OF JESUS CHRIST PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Jesus is the Word made flesh in our midst;
may His incarnation fill our heart with joy and peace

O LORD, GIVE US PEACE.

Jesus is the promised Savior, born of Mary;
may His birth among us renew our hope.

O LORD, GIVE US HOPE.

Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.
May the gift of His presence bring forth rejoicing.

O LORD, GIVE US JOY.

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the Magi,
the obedience of Mary and Joseph, and the peace of the
Christ child be ours this Christmas.

**MAY THE BLESSING OF GOD ALMIGHTY, THE FATHER, SON
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, BE UPON US AND REMAIN WITH US
ALWAYS. ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU HAVE Poured UPON US
THE NEW LIGHT OF YOUR INCARNATE WORD: GRANT THAT
THIS LIGHT, ENKINDLED IN OUR HEARTS, MAY SHINE FORTH
IN OUR LIVES, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER, WHO TAUGHT US TO
PRAY, "OUR FATHER..."**