

**Images of Christmas**  
**Luke 2:1-14**  
***December 22, 2019***

Most of us grew up with images of the Christmas season. For me as a boy Christmas was not a religious holiday. In Scotland the church at that time viewed Christmas as a pagan festival and smacked too much of Roman Catholicism for their liking. Indeed, I don't think I even got Christmas day off work. New Years was Scotland's big celebration and the whiskey bottle became a symbol of the holiday season. Indeed, one of my lasting memories is my father filling up our small sideboard with sherry, whiskey, stouts, and other drinks. This was the only time of the year he bought spirits or beer. My most clear memories of Christmas are coming down the stairs to see what Santa had put into my stocking. In it I might find an orange, apple, and some sweets. Perhaps the most heart-warming memory for me was the annual holiday dinner at my Aunt Ruby's home. She had a lovely home with a garage, a large garden, and beautiful carpets that we as boys loved to roll around on. And the meal was always magnificent. Church or Christianity played no roll in our Christmas or New Years celebrations.

So, I grew up with very little imagery of Christmas. But now as a Christian I have inherited a rich store of biblical images. Luke along with Matthew provides the rich storehouse of birth images. From Luke we have the journey to Bethlehem, the crowded town and the lack of space in the inn, swaddling cloths, the manger scene, the shepherds, the host of heavenly angels: this is powerful stuff! Matthew is more subdued, but adds the colourful visit of the wise men and the meeting with Herod, and the Christmas Star.

If we were to put the Luke birth story alongside any of the pagan or Greek gods birth stories, we would immediately see the difference. Luke's style is like entering an 18<sup>th</sup> century English drawing room with a Mozart sonata playing in the background. By comparison the pagan style for a birth story of a god would be like watching a Stephen Spielberg blockbuster movie with all the special effects, explosions, and mad, frenetic chase scenes. What I'm trying to say is that Luke's account, compared to ancient writings on such a potentially earth-

shattering event, is surprisingly straightforward, down to earth, and historically believable. In short, Luke's birth account is brief and devoid of miracles or angels or unusual incident.

There is no heavenly glow in the manger, no angels present, no trumpets, no talking animals, no star to announce the momentous occasion. Luke's glow is over on the hillside with the shepherds. It's not until we climb the hill to the shepherds that we find Luke putting the subject of the birth into a much larger framework. Were this a pagan story I suspect there would be miracles, trumpets blazing, fireworks going off and the gods all having a gigantic party. Luke writes as the phrase in the Carol puts it, "all is calm, all is bright", no more no less.

But let's dwell for a while on the images Luke gives us. We begin with the image of **power** in the person of Emperor Caesar Augustus and his administrative bureaucracy in Palestine. The emperor stands in marked contrast to the humble family gathered in Bethlehem. Caesar rules a mighty empire that spans most of the known world. He controls vast wealth, and subdues his enemies with an army that strikes fear into the hearts of any who oppose him. This is the context of Jesus' birth. It is a time of great confidence and achievement for the empire. Augustus has brought the Pax Romana to every corner of empire, cleared the Mediterranean of pirates and put Rome's finances on a healthy course. The images of empire, not unlike today, are impressive: marching legions, iron discipline, raw power, great cities, art, sculpture, a law code, enlightened government, music, architecture that will inspire generations to come.

All of this stands in marked contrast to the scenes in and around Bethlehem which feature, poverty, powerlessness, and the rustic lives of outcast shepherds.

It is the **Emperor** Augustus that brings Mary & Joseph to Bethlehem. Sometimes God works through the powerful without their knowledge. This baby born in this out of the way place, in a corner of the empire that Caesar values little; this baby has none of the marks of power. He is engulfed by ordinariness. And yet it is this contrast that Luke so beautifully sets out for us readers. He wants us to know just how amazing is this birth of the "God with us" child. The Caesars will be

gone within five hundred years and all their power swept away by other armies and other forces. Jesus' kingdom remains! The child born of Mary is the future. Who would have thought!

But what of us? We are people who may feel we have achieved. We have or are close to centre stage. We have raised families; we have succeeded in careers; we have constructed a life of respectability and achievement that we are reasonably proud of. Or perhaps we are on the road to these ends. In light of the images Luke presents to us of empire and humble family in Bethlehem, where do we identify? Are we the expectant ones? Are we engaged in the building of Christ's kingdom and is this our passion? Or perhaps are we easily sidetracked by the temptations that empire presents to the achievers?

There is simplicity and wonder in these images of Christmas that Luke provides. And at every point they stand in marked contrast to the symbols of power and achievement that Rome and Caesar represent. To what extent, we ask, are these images of simplicity, wonder and the spiritual at the very heart of our lives as Christians?

May this child of Bethlehem and the images Matthew and Luke provide, be the pattern for our individual and corporate lives. This child born of the expectant Mary, this humble peasant woman, may he be born into our hearts.

**Amen**