

Rome or Bethlehem?

Text: Luke 2:1-14

Suggested Hymns:

34, 627, 624, 50 ALHB, 33

1) Earthly Splendour Or Divine Majesty?

2) Food And Fun, Or Salvation?

3) Vices Or Virtues?

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 2:1-14, ¹ *And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* ² *This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.* ³ *So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.*

⁴ *Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,* ⁵ *to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.*

⁶ *So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.* ⁷ *And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

⁸ *Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.* ⁹ *And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.*

¹⁰ *Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.* ¹¹ *For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* ¹² *And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."* ¹³ *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Two cities attract our attention as we read the inspired Christmas story of St. Luke. The one is Bethlehem, a small town, made famous by King David, and still more famous by great David's greater Son. The other is Rome, the large city from which Caesar Augustus directed the affairs of the whole civilised world at that time.

Judged by earthly standards, the town of Bethlehem is hardly worth our attention. Its inhabitants were few. Dark and silent was the night of which our text speaks. The lowly people, for such were the inhabitants of Bethlehem, had sought their beds to rest from the labours of the past day. Even the Roman government officials who were taking a census at Bethlehem had retired for the night.

The highways and byways leading to the city were deserted, with one exception. On a winding path from the near-by hills shepherds are seen walking quickly towards Bethlehem. In low voices they carry on an animated conversation.

They speak of a message direct from heaven, directing them to Bethlehem and telling them that the long-expected Saviour of the world is born. They arrive in Bethlehem, go to a stable, as they have been told, fall on their knees before a manger in which a new-born Child is lying, and worship this Child as their Lord and Saviour.

The city of Rome, at the same time, is still full of life and activity. The palace of the emperor is lighted, and happy laughter issues from it. Proud, robust soldiers, strutting about in their shining armour, equipped with sword, spear, and shield, speak of the power of Rome, and the merry making heard here and there bears witness to the fun of the city.

Capitol Hill, the magnificent temple of Jupiter, the imposing treasury building, the large court building, speak to us of idolatrous worship, great wealth, and able statesmanship. Rome was, also on that night, an imposing city and was crowded, while Bethlehem seemingly could lay no claim to greatness and fame. Rome attracted the masses; Bethlehem apparently had nothing to offer.

We are this morning on the way to Bethlehem. God's messenger directs us there and promises us great joy. Comparatively few are going with us.

Compared with the multitudes which ignore Bethlehem, the pilgrims to this little town on Christmas Day resemble the small group of shepherds who about 2,000 years ago, at the bidding of the angel, sought and found the Christ Child in the manger.

Rome is still attractive. Power and pomp, pleasures and diversions are still sought after, while Bethlehem with its Christ Child and salvation is despised.

Are we perhaps affected by the trend of the world in which we live? Are we attending this service really because we want to go to Bethlehem, or is our heart in Rome?

Let us on this Christmas Day gain anew the assurance that Bethlehem has what we need and that Rome, represented by worldliness, can offer us nothing lasting. Let us dwell on the question, *Rome or Bethlehem?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Earthly Splendour Or Divine Majesty?

In ancient Rome earthly splendour was in evidence everywhere. No one in Rome could doubt the power of the Roman government. Rome ruled the world. Even distant Palestine was subject to Rome.

Our text tells us that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered and taxed. Whether the nations wanted to comply or not mattered very little. They had to obey. All people everywhere had to go to the city of their fathers to be enrolled.

This decree was the reason why Mary and Joseph journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, for both were of the house and lineage of David.

Rome was proud of its world dominion and maintained it by garrisons in all provinces. Rome boasted not only of power but also of Culture. Art and science were studiously cultivated. The philosophers of Rome shared honours with those of Athens. In fact, Rome became the Mecca of all who sought fame in the realm of philosophy.

The public buildings had architectural beauty, although of a somewhat different type from that of the Greeks. The highways from Rome to all parts of the world were wisely planned and well constructed. All roads led to Rome. Everywhere man hailed Rome as the centre of the world.

How insignificant Bethlehem appeared in comparison! True, its history, too, spoke of external glory, but of a glory that had vanished. Bethlehem was the city of David. The house of David had at one time resembled a large tree whose branches extended over many nations, from the River Euphrates to Egypt, but now only a stump remained of that glorious tree.

Out of its roots now grew a tender Branch. Joseph and Mary, two descendants of David, go to Bethlehem and find lodging in a stable. There Mary brings forth a Son and lays Him in a manger. Who wants to go to Bethlehem, this small city, in which no impressive buildings are found and no splendour is displayed?

But wait! Where is this proud Rome, this mighty empire of which Rome was the capital? It is fallen. Daniel's prophecy uttered in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream is fulfilled.¹ The Roman empire fell to pieces. And so did all other kingdoms of the world after a few decades, or, at best, after a few centuries.

Earthly splendour passes away. The hymnist wrote, "*Change and decay in all around I see.*"² Also in the mightiest of human institutions. The nations of the world are now in a death grapple, each one seeking to obtain more power and dominion.

But it matters little which of these nations will win, for the victorious nation will again run the course of Rome. If you are running with the crowds to Rome, if your eyes are focused admiringly on the great works of men, you are attaching yourselves to perishable things, which are of little value, and of no value at all for eternity.

Come, let us go back to Bethlehem. There we find no human splendour, but we find there divine majesty. There One is seen who does not change and whose glory does not fade away. We find Him in the manger. That little Child is — hear it, everyone — "*the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father.*"³ The preacher from heaven describes Him as such.

The Angel said to the shepherds, that the Lord is born. In that Child "*dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.*"⁴ Later Jesus whom we now see in the manger declared that He is God's only-begotten Son, that all people should

honour Him, even as they honour the Father, that He and the Father are one, that He will come again in His glory to judge all nations.

And He produced the evidence for His deity. Incurable diseases yielded to His Word; He told the dumb to speak, and their tongues were loosed; He told the deaf to hear, and their ears were opened; He told the blind to see, and their eyes had vision; He told the lame to walk, and their feet and limbs became firm; He told the dead to rise, and the soul returned to its abandoned mortal abode.

His disciples heard His testimony and saw His miracles, and they confessed: *“¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”⁵*

Their unanimous confession was: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁶* Divine majesty is found in Bethlehem. And it is an abiding majesty. His majesty is eternal. And His kingdom is eternal. Daniel had said of it that it would never be destroyed. And the angel said to Mary concerning this child in Luke 1:33, *³³ And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”*

He reigns throughout all generations, not only over the nations which Caesar Augustus controlled, but over all nations. Even at that time Augustus had to serve Him. Without knowing it, that proud Roman emperor issued a decree which led Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem in harmony with the prophecy of Micah.

This Child is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. What will you have: Rome with its tinsel splendour, or Bethlehem where the Creator and Ruler of the universe is found and is ready to use His majesty for your benefit?

The hymnist wrote,⁷

To Bethlehem hasten with joyful accord;
Oh, come ye, come hither to worship the Lord.

2. Food And Fun, Or Salvation?

Rome in those days had other things to offer. It heeded the cry of the people: bread and circus, food and fun. The people were fed and entertained, and work was performed chiefly by slaves. Happiness was sought in the goods and pleasures of this world. Men tried to forget the next world.

Just as in our days, many of the Romans, especially among the wealthy and educated, denied their eternal destiny and resigned themselves to annihilation. On the tombs of some of them were found such inscriptions as the following: “*We all, whom death has laid low, are decaying bones and ashes, nothing more.*” “*I was nought, I am nought. You who reads this: Eat, drink, make merry, come.*” In spite of these arrogant denials, men were afraid of the world to come.

In spite of their hilarity, they, too, thought of their sins and of a righteous God, and they became frightened. They sacrificed to their gods, but found no real, abiding comfort by doing so. When illness came or death approached, their souls were parched, but their thirst for some assurance of salvation was not assuaged. Rome gave food for the body and fun for the mind, but nothing for the soul. Rome, after all, was poor, woefully poor, disastrously poor, and its poverty will be fully exposed on Judgement Day.

The Rome of today offers just what old Rome offered, nothing more. People demand food and fun. “*The world owes me a living,*” is an expression commonly heard. A living, and a comfortable one, is the goal which men set for themselves and for their children.

And the world with all its ingenuity, cunning, and energy, tries to supply these things. Opportunities are offered to men and women to fit themselves for the acquiring of food and the enjoyment of life. But what about the longing of the soul for assurance that God is reconciled to man? What about the anxious question of the soul: *How can the holy God, who hates sin and punishes sinners, be gracious and merciful to me?* Does Rome, does the world today, supply peace for the soul by answering these questions? No, it ignores the wants of the soul. Yes, it frequently denies that man need be concerned about his relationship to God.

Man is told, “*There is no God.*” Or, if this be too crude for some in view of the world which speaks of a wise Creator, this message goes out: “*God is good; God is love; He cannot be so cruel as to punish man eternally for his sins.*” Many people try to persuade themselves that they do not need to worry about God and eternity, but there are times when the soul cries out anew for consolation. Where can this balm be found?

What Rome fails to give, Bethlehem offers and imparts to man. There man's greatest need is supplied: salvation. He really needs salvation, for by sin he has lost it. The shepherds realised the need of salvation, especially that night when God's messenger stood before them and the glory of the Lord turned the darkness of the night into the brightness of day.

"They were greatly afraid," says our text. Why did fear fill their hearts? Their conscience spoke to them of many and grievous sins against Him whose messenger stood before them. Their hearts asked the anxious question: *"Did God send His messenger to proclaim His wrath and to punish us?"* Their souls realised that they needed forgiving mercy, salvation undeserved. And Bethlehem supplied it all.

The angel said, *"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."*

Go to Bethlehem, said he; there you will find that God loves you; there you will find the Saviour and get the assurance that God who is just and therefore hates sin is merciful and gracious and loves the sinners.

Out of love to you He has sent His own Son for your salvation. And what the angel preached, his heavenly choir sang: *¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* The holy singers praise God for His faithfulness in fulfilling His ancient promises; for His love in supplying a Saviour; for His omnipotence in bringing about the birth of His Son by a virgin; in short, for supplying in His unfathomable mercy their greatest need, salvation.

And the shepherds came and saw and worshiped. As poor sinners they knelt before the manger and were assured that this Child was their Saviour, that in Him they found all that they had lost by sin. Let Rome have abundance and fun, the shepherds were made unspeakably happy by God's gift in Bethlehem. They glorified and praised God for what they had found in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem offers us the same treasures of salvation. We need salvation because we are sinners. Most of us probably know this truth and all its implications. Others do not know their sins nor the consequences of sin.

Let me ask such: What would you do if suddenly in the stillness of the night a messenger of God would appear before you and God's glory would shine

around you? Would you keep on boasting as you do now that you are good enough for heaven, that you have merited life eternal, that God owes you eternal blessings? Why keep on throwing sand into your eyes? You are a wicked sinner.

God knows it; and before His throne no unscrupulous, cunning lawyer can help you to cover your wickedness. And if you realise this, then hasten to Bethlehem. There you will see the love which moved God to send His Son into the world and will learn that this love extends to you.

The angel says that this gift of God is meant for you. Christmas joy, says he, shall be to all people. This Child is the Saviour of all people. *“¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Likewise we read in 1 Timothy 1:15, *¹⁵ This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*

This Child is what the inhabitants of Sychar called Him: *“The Saviour of the world.”⁸* He came to take our place and to assume our guilt, to suffer and die in our stead. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin. Are you afraid of punishment? This Child came to suffer it. Are you afraid of hell? This Child came to open heaven’s door to sinners.

Are you afraid of death? This Child came to give you life eternal. Simeon said in Luke 2:29–32, *²⁹ “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation ³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.”*

All that we need to live joyfully, to die in peace, and to be saved — all is found in Bethlehem. It can be found nowhere else. Rome’s treasures are found in many places. Many in this world, and even in our town, could offer you a beautiful home, abundant food, culture, honour, and unlimited opportunities to enjoy worldly pleasures. But the treasures of salvation are found only in this Child in Bethlehem. He is the Saviour, and there is no other. Rome or Bethlehem?

To Bethlehem hasten with joyful accord;
Oh, come ye, come hither to worship the Lord.

3. Vices Or Virtues?

Rome or Bethlehem? This question finally resolves itself into this question: *Vices or virtue?* Vices means wickedness, immorality, sin, depravity, corruption, iniquity, and evil.

Rome was an immoral city. The Romans did not worship the one true God, the Creator of heaven and earth, but many gods, idols, the product of man's imagination. The number of gods was increased with the death of the emperors, for with death each emperor became a deity. When Caesar Augustus died, the Roman Senate deified him by a special decree.

Creatures, not the Creator were worshiped. And, like all heathen, the Romans invented idols which resembled them, the Romans. The same vices which were found with the Romans were also ascribed to their gods. The people of Rome were separated from the true God and therefore were dead to righteousness and alive to wickedness.

Not only was their worship itself an abomination to the true God, but also the result of their religion was again abominable wickedness. Read Romans 1:29-31, where Paul describes the vices in which the heathen, including the Romans, lived. The Romans loved sin and yet recognised the service of sin as a bondage. Many of their serious minded citizens began to preach a regeneration, but they had no message with power to change the heart of man. Rome remained a cesspool of wickedness.

And Rome today is wicked. The world loves sin. It is not always the same sin in which the individuals live. Some in hatred, murder, theft etc. Our court proceedings, prison records, and newspapers chronicle the wicked conditions in the world.

Many people realise that the sad conditions in our country will lead the nation to ruin, and many individuals fret under the bondage of their sin-service, but, as in Rome of old, the power is lacking to produce the desirable change. They could be delivered from the bondage of sin. There is a place where sinners find strength and power to resist sin, and that place is Bethlehem.

The Saviour in the manger supplies the motive and the and the power for a holy life. He is the Saviour not only from the guilt and punishment of sin, but also from the dominion of sin.

We are told that the shepherds glorified God. They did this not only with their lips but also with their lives. The motive was the love of God who sent His Son into the world for their salvation; the love of the Christ Child who had left the throne of His glory to become poor, despised, and crucified for their redemption.

And in this Christ Child they found also the power to resist the inclination or impulses to sin from within and the temptations to sin from without. By faith they were united with Him and took from Him not only consolation, but also the strength to live a life of gratitude.

We can find the same in the Christ Child. What shall it be, Rome or Bethlehem? Outward glory or divine majesty? Earthly treasures and pleasures, or salvation? Vices or virtues?

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,

To Bethlehem hasten with joyful accord;

Oh, come ye, come hither to worship the Lord. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Daniel 2:40-43

² Hymn 543

³ Isaiah 9:6

⁴ Colossians 2:9

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ Matthew 16:16

⁷ Hymn 50 ALHB

⁸ John 4:42