

Sermon Archive 324

Friday 25 December, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 1: 46-55

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Holding a census. Hmm. It's a bit fiddly counting all the people, and pretty much an upheaval of regular life to get them into the right place for counting. And in each of the counting places you have to have people who are capable of counting! So there's recruiting and training you need to provide. It's not an easy project, doing a census. And there's a fair bit of grumbling that goes on among the people - which you can understand. In some jurisdictions, people are just counted where they are - kind of as is, where is. But **our** systems require our people to go home (ancestral home) for the counting. So it's time away from work, packing the kids into the car and driving awkward distances - congestion and, honestly, pressure on many local infrastructures. Some of those ancestral places weren't made for great invasions of people - not enough food, enough accommodation, enough water. I can see why they don't enjoy it. But I'm going to count them anyway.

To garner a bit of cooperation, we put about the reasons for counting. It's about planning, providing resources for infrastructure. It's about getting to know them, so we can serve them better. That's the kind of stuff we say to convince them. Some of them believe it; most, if they don't believe it, still they cooperate, because they don't really have a choice. We are government, and they are people; and the people have noticed other things that we, the government, have done with those who step out of line - right up to the very public and cross shaped statements we make about those who don't cooperate.

Generally they're willing enough to go where we tell them to go, and patient enough to stand still while we count them (1, 2, 3, 4) and take their names.

I don't need to tell you, but I'm going to anyway, because you look like trustworthy people, and I feel like displaying my power a bit, that the provision of infrastructure isn't what it's really about. That's just what I tell them. Hospitals and schools and roads are all very well. I count them because it's militarily helpful to know how many of them there are. If there are more people, we're going to need more troops to control them. And unless you know who they are (a list of names, and occupations, and incomes), it's harder to tax them. I need to know where they are, so that if I need to speak to them, I can track them down. This census thing is complicated to organise, but it's important for my being in control. Form a tidy line, people! Stay exactly where you are, while I gather my information about you, so I can take your money, and derive some strange political pleasure from keeping you in a tidy, obedient state. Augustus decrees, Quirinius governs, the people fall into a line.

I don't know whether he was born before we did the counting, or after it. Probably before, because the word is that his parents had only just arrived - just got there in time; but I can't be sure of that, so I don't know whether my Bethlehem numbers are right, or a little bit wrong. His birth added a slight imprecision to things. The next bit of numerical imprecision was to come when his family, having been counted in the Hebrew numbers, cancelled their plans to go home again to Nazareth. At the last moment, without telling us, they headed off to Egypt - and you know Egypt's not part of Rome - we can't tax Hebrews in Egypt. Are our numbers out by one birth, or by three defecting? This family, this

holy family, are playing with our precision.

Worse was to come, of course. Eventually they went back to Nazareth (plus three); one of them died, but there's no death record, so no tax-helpful information about when three became two. Then there emerged references to another "father"; should he be counted? His details were never clear - for tax purposes he might as well have been in heaven!

But the unstable numbers weren't really the thing. The big thing was this kind of culture he began to spread among others. We wanted people to form a straight line, to stay put in the line, to remain where they were for the counting. He started speaking of their God as a wind that came from nowhere, blowing hither and you, moving the spirited ones to places unimaginable. We wanted to take from the people - take money, take freedom, take life. He started speaking about a God who wanted not to take, but to give. Give freedom, give life, give daily bread, give hope, give wonderment, give peace, give! We wanted to treat people like numbers, IRD numbers, customer numbers, just numbers. He told them that they were beautiful - children of the living God, called not by number, but by name. He told them that whether they deserved it or not, they were loved.

It seemed to me that he was, all his life, from birth to death, standing for all those things that our census was trying to crush. He was the king of another kingdom altogether. That Bethlehem imprecision was a wee foreshadowing of a great chaos he would bring. So long as he lives, the census is busted!

The good thing, from my point of view, though, is that the damage won't be permanent. He won't live forever, and anyone he's

inspired won't persist with the folly. I mean it's not like two thousand years from now anyone's going to remember him, celebrate that he was born. It's not like all around the world, people will gather to say his name, follow his cause, be his people. It's not as if that other kingdom of the unknown Father in Heaven is going to claim the hearts of anyone - doing justice on earth and truth on earth, and grace on earth. No, all that is sure to die down, and people will move back into line. They'll stand still again while we give them numbers, and take away their money - because that's just the way of the world, isn't it! Isn't it? Is it?

This was just the first census while Quirinius was governor of Syria; and there are bound to be more of them. Won't there? Or is the census totally busted?

Happy Christmas to you all. Thanks to God, the census is busted!