

“Prepare the way of the Lord” Luke 3:4

Roy A. Harrisville III, December 6, 2009

Why does Luke spend so much time on the historical stuff? He takes pains to tell us about the rulers and governors who controlled the Roman world at the time of Jesus’ birth. It seems as though he is some kind of detail freak who likes to impress his audience with how much he knows. The list of authority figures is long and lay readers are glad when they don’t have to read the names in public! But that’s not it. Luke isn’t just trying to show off. There are good reasons why he does this. The most important reason was that Jesus Christ and John the Baptist were an actual historical persons and this is Luke’s way of telling us that.

Jesus was not just some myth. Even the Muslims believe he existed. It says in the Koran that Jesus walked the earth and performed miracles. The name of Jesus is also mentioned briefly in first century Roman literature. In the roman author Suetonius’ lives of the Caesars he mentions a man named Chrestus who had been the cause of trouble in Rome and that’s why the emperor expelled the Jews from the eternal city. Jesus was a real man. He was an historical figure of note. Most commoners don’t get mentioned in anyone’s literature. But this common man did. He must have done something uncommon to get their attention.

Maybe all that is obvious and it’s no big deal to most folks. Maybe you don’t even think about it at all. But what if Christ had only been spiritual? What if he had only been some kind of idea or notion that someone dreamed up? As wonderful as such a story might be, it would still be just a story. It would be a myth. And myths have nothing to do with us. Oh yes, they can influence gullible people to act certain ways, but they can’t

penetrate to the very depths of the human beings because they're not real. They can't really grab hold of us the way real-life stories do. Myths can't demand our faith in the same way that Christ can. This is not some New Age tale of otherworldly pseudo-spiritual mumbo jumbo. This is Jesus who was born, lived and died in the Roman province of Palestine. Those are facts that cannot be disputed and have been accepted by unbelievers as well as believers. He was real. He is not just a story.

If he is real, and he is, then the Christian faith is founded on truth not fiction. The Christian is able to walk where Jesus walked and see what he saw and smell what he smelled. Myths won't allow that. New Age gurus can't show you where their ideas grew up and spiritualists can't take you to the city where they died. But you can go to Bethlehem. You can go to Jerusalem. You can even sail on the Sea of Galilee.

That's why Luke spends so much time on this historical stuff. That's why it's important. We need to know that Jesus was real.

There's another reason too why Luke talks here about the rulers so much. It was customary when writing a biography of an important person to say when he was born and who was ruling at the time. Of course, to do so for a common person was to fly in the face of all those fancy folks. Jesus, a no-account carpenter or stone mason (we don't really know which he was), is given the same honor in Luke's book as if he had been of royal blood. But there's the irony. He is of royal blood, and then some! Not only that but he would not follow the same pattern of governing as did all those others whom Luke mentions.

Think of them. Tiberius Caesar had reigned fifteen years by the time Jesus appeared on the radar screen. Tiberius had by that time degenerated into a filthy old man

whose only interest was sexual degradation and parties. He never really wanted to be Caesar anyway.

Then there's Pontius Pilate. Here was a man who killed people indiscriminately, robbed from the temple treasury in Jerusalem, and was finally banished by Tiberius.

Herod the Great, you remember him? He was the ruler of Judea when Jesus was born and the one who tried to kill the baby Jesus and ended up killing dozens of innocent people instead. When he died his sons ruled in his place. His namesake, Herod Antipas, got Galilee, and Philip, his brother, got the territory north of that. We never hear of Philip. Herod Antipas was the one who mocked Jesus later on in the Gospel.

Then we skip to Caiaphas the high priest who thought that it was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to suffer. A good politician there. He had savvy. He knew when his power was threatened and he knew what to do about it.

This list of rulers in Luke's Gospel is a rogue's gallery. That's what it is. It's a rogue's gallery of those mighty men who opposed Christ and his coming. Where are they now? If it were not for the New Testament and Luke the only people who would know about them would be history professors. Rome is gone. The empire is gone. The temple is gone. Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, Philip, Herod Antipas; they're all gone.

Only Jesus remains. His rule will last forever because it has nothing to do with the normal politics and power plays that marked the rogues in Luke's gallery.

Luke is telling us how to prepare for the Lord when he mentions this rogue's gallery. He is also telling us how not to prepare the way of the Lord. He is telling us that the usual assumptions of power, pride, and prestige cannot be employed in Christ's

service. He's telling us that Jesus will be the mirror opposite of those famous men. We must meet him differently from the way we meet kings and emperors and governors.

That's why Luke tells us about John. He was an odd character to be sure. He wore strange clothes and his diet, as the Gospel of Matthew tells us, wasn't something that you'd find on the restaurant page in the newspaper.

He prepared the way of the Lord. That was his job. He prepared the people for the first coming of the Christ. He did so by means of baptism. This baptism was special because it was a baptism of repentance in preparation for something greater. The crowds flocked around him because there was a spiritual hunger and thirst in their hearts that could only be satisfied by this crazed man in the wilderness.

Repentance is not what Tiberius and all the other rulers ever did. In fact, repentance is not the default setting of most leaders. These days, as back then, people in power almost never apologize or say they are sorry or repent for wrongdoing because that is understood by many as a sign of weakness. But the kingdom of God in Christ is not like kingdoms of this world. To the repentant and humble God gives the power to become children of God and bestows on them eternal life. That eternal life is precisely what Tiberius and Philip and Caiaphas all wanted. They either erected monuments to themselves or followed the ritual law as they thought they should, in an effort to establish themselves in the memories of future generations or in the memory of God Himself. They wanted eternal honors. Instead, they have received everlasting shame and a place in the rogues' gallery.

We do not wait for our Lord with pride and a sense of self-righteousness. We do not come to his holy supper thinking that we have nothing to confess. We do not

approach the table of grace with our chests puffed out and our hearts content in the knowledge that we are better than others. We are not like the rogues in Luke's gallery. We are Christians. We are different. We are obedient to a different Lord and operate by different ethical standards. We do not ascend into heaven to claim our prize but the prize descends from heaven to claim us. We do not make the roads straight and the rough places plain but God himself prepares the way into our hearts.

Christians reject the way of those rogues in Luke's gallery, and we embrace the way of John and Jesus. It is the way of repentance, humility, and eternal life. It is the way of God who makes deserts to spring with life and who straightens every crooked road into our lives. May His road find its way into every heart! Amen. Come Lord Jesus!