

# Nativity of the Lord Proper 1

25.12.2016  
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## Introduction

Even though conflict is one of the threads woven into the background of the Christmas story – the census was, after all, a registration enabling a controlling foreign power to extract taxes from a subjugated people – it does not tend to be our first thought when reading these well-known texts. Nevertheless Luke's account of the birth of Jesus in the first 20 verses of chapter 2 contains a number of threads which can help to guide us as we negotiate situations of change or conflict. These notes for Proper 1 focus on the first half of the passage and those for Proper 2 on the second half – with each pointing to a different, but nevertheless complementary insight.

## Anchor Question

Think about a movement (whether small or large, personal or political, in the church, local community or workplace) which has had a significant impact or resulted in change – either positive or negative. At what different levels did things happen to bring that about, and how important were the actions of individual people or small groups in this?

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## Text

### Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see— I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

[When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

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## Comment

These first fourteen verses of the Lucan birth narrative contain a number of interesting contrasts. The passage itself is bookended by two explicit ones involving scale, and between these sits an inferred one centred on response. Taken together they provide us with a useful lens through which to look at our own dynamic situations – whether or not these are directly related to conflict.

The opening verses immediately present us with a contrast of size. Luke uses the Greek word *polis* (city) with reference to both Galilee and Bethlehem, but at this time neither was much more than a village. However even had they been larger settlements – or indeed cities like Jerusalem – there would still be a striking disparity with the *oikoumenē* – the whole Roman world – of verse 1. Thus we are presented on the one hand with a theatre of action which – both in terms of geographical size and people involved – is vast; and on the other with one which is minuscule to the point of being virtually invisible. However in a way which is reminiscent of the Matthean paradoxes examined in our Advent reflections, it is the second of these two stages on which the truly significant action – both humanly and cosmically – is unfolding through the birth of Jesus.

The reading closes with another disparity which is just as extreme, although now the difference is one of *status* between the two groups of witnesses who attest to the birth of Christ and its meaning. A significant pivotal focus of First Century Mediterranean society was its honour–shame dynamic with ‘honour’ being closely related to the status one held in the community and its recognition by others. Honour could be both ascribed – i.e. deriving from birth into an honourable family – or acquired through skill or merit. In the Lucan narrative both shepherds and angels thus play a significant role because they validate events which require public recognition in order for the appropriate honour to be ascribed to Jesus.

Whilst shepherds were associated with Moses and David, and there are numerous positive images of shepherds in Israel’s scriptures, their social status was lowly. In contrast the angels – coming from the presence of God and bringing ‘the Glory of the Lord’ (cf Ex 24: 16–17) with them, sit close to the apex of the heavenly hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is the testimony of the shepherds which has a more far-reaching effect – they are the ones who, in the second half of the passage, go out and spread the word to others thus enabling the necessary public acknowledgement. So once again we have a scenario where a critical action occurs at the level of the seemingly small and insignificant.

The third incidence – which sits between these two – also plays to the same theme. Here the contrast is one of response and is inferred rather than directly presented by the text. For the Jewish nation, censuses were considered contrary to God’s will (cf. Ex 30:12; 2 Sam 24) and so were forbidden by their own law. Thus being required to register for the purposes of taxation by their Roman overlords was galling from both a religious and a nationalistic perspective. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that the ‘census set up by

Quirinius in 6AD led to both the revolt of Judas the Gallilean (Acts 5:37) and – according to Josephus – to the formation of the Zealot party. Such actions however stand in marked difference to the response of Joseph who – despite all the religious and nationalistic tensions and issues associated with compliance – obeys the directions and goes to be registered for taxation. In a sense this is simply a continuation of the trajectory which we explored in Advent 4: Joseph once again

chooses not to be driven in a particular direction, but instead to allow other possibilities to shape his direction. We can see this as being part of his own journey of understanding but it also points us once again towards the fact that significant drivers of events can often be located at the level of individual reception and response.

So then, in the first part of his birth narrative, Luke presents us with a series of contrasts which point towards an important principle: the most significant actions and dynamic drivers do not necessarily occur at the level of the large. Interestingly, the construction of the narrative – in which these contrasts are easily lost to view behind the ‘main’ storyline – itself also illustrates the point. Whilst we obviously need to be aware of the big picture in any scenario, allowing it to absorb our full attention can lead us to overlook the individual elements or people contributing to it. Since this is often where significant and game-changing dynamics – both positive and negative – occur, such neglect also means that we may miss out on observing/understanding critical elements of a situation and on the opportunity to influence these through participation or response. Moreover, as the reflection for Proper 2 suggests, careful and holistic attention to the composite elements can often help us to a better understanding of the bigger picture in a given situation.

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## Response

Think about your church, or another group in which you are involved. How well do you know the people who make up that group and what is important to them about the way it behaves or the direction it takes? Do you think it is important to know or understand each other's stories at this sort of level? Why or why not? What practical steps could you take to get to know at least one other person in your group and develop a better understanding of what motivates, inspires or frustrates them with respect to the direction of the group?

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## Prayer

A collect.

God of the small,  
whose fullness was once contained within a womb,  
help us not to be distracted by the large,  
but instead to notice you at work  
through the little things,  
so that we too may become agents of change  
in the service of One  
who came into the world  
not armed with strength or protected by privilege  
but in the insignificant form  
of a baby.

Amen.