

I'll keep it a bit shorter today because we have a CCS speaker after the homily. I want to start out with a little history lesson relating to the Gospel. Listen again, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. He went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Why does Luke include this information for us? Partly, it's a matter of dating the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke wants to make sure we know he isn't telling us a myth. Stories about Zeus or Hercules take place in some vague past. But Jesus is real. He lived in a historical place and time. But if this was all Luke wanted to do, simply saying "in the fifteenth year of Tiberias Caesar" would have sufficed.

But Luke wants to do more. In these few words and names Luke describes for us a world and atmosphere that is oppressive and filled with injustice. Tiberias was the second Roman Emperor, the stepson of the first emperor, Augustus. By his fifteenth year on the throne he was spending most of his time in debauchery at his pleasure palace on the island of Capri in the Bay of Naples – making ever more erratic and tyrannical decrees while being worshipped as a god throughout the eastern Empire. Pontius Pilate was his man in Palestine. A second-tier Roman politician, he was arrogant and cruel towards the inhabitants of the Jewish homeland he was supposed to govern.

Herod (Antipas) and Philip weren't Romans, but they weren't really Jews either. They were sons of Herod the Great, the half-Jewish Tyrant King we meet in the stories of Jesus' birth – who killed the Holy Innocents. Herod the Great was Augustus' local strongman, through whom he controlled Judea. We can think of Herod Antipas and Philip as being like the sons of the Godfather – part of a mafia, who were given

small regions to rule by the Romans as a favor for their father's past services. We don't anything about Lysanias.

Regarding the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas – Caiaphas, the High Priest at the time, was the son-in-law of Annas, himself a former High Priest, who still seems to have been the power behind Caiaphas. Both were tools of the Romans, who raised up and deposed High Priests at will.

Luke's point is that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus were suffering from political and religious oppression, leading them to long for freedom and justice. And it is into this situation that John the Baptist comes, proclaiming the need for repentance from sins and preparing the way of the Lord Messiah, who would bring a new way of life and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah we heard in our first reading.

We are in year three of the lectionary cycle, when we hear the gospel of Luke read every Sunday. A major theme, perhaps the major theme, in Luke's Gospel is God's love for the poor and the outcasts of

society. In a world where Roman foreigners and their local puppets ruled everyone, Jesus would come as a baby, born in a stable. And then the first would be last, and the last first, and this world's way of doing things would be turned upside down.

We do not live in ancient Palestine or the Roman Empire, but injustice and poverty still afflict us. There are still the poor and outcasts among us, and we still long for a different, charitable way of living. And that is why this Advent, in the days before we celebrate that baby in the stable, I invited Erin McGuire from Catholic Community Services to speak to us, asking us to help make Jesus' love present and felt in our world in a concrete way.