

Christ's History, and Ours

Gustavo Gutiérrez

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE tells us that "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:1-2). The Gospel of Matthew adds that Jesus was born "in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod" (2:1).

These simple texts convey a profound message: Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time. He was born under Emperor Octavius, who had himself named Augustus when he reached the pinnacle of power; when Quirinius was governor of Syria; during the reign of Herod, who was traitor to

his people and had sold out to the occupying power. It was during this time that Jesus was born, a man of no importance in the eyes of the cynical and arrogant authorities as well as in the eyes of those who disguised cowardice as peace and political realism.

^{Jesus} He was born in Bethlehem, "one of the little clans of Judah" (Mi. 5:2), where at his birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors in the town, as the Gospels tell us; we are reminded of the popular Mexican custom of *las posadas*. There, on the fringe of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness; but we can say, too, that by this becoming, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But these "births" must not make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact, the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction, a symbol, a cipher. Apart from its historical coordinates the event loses its meaning. To

the eyes of Christians the incarnation is the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable.

The Son of God was born into a little people, a nation of little importance by comparison with the great powers of the time. Furthermore, he took flesh among the poor in a marginal area – namely, Galilee; he lived with the poor and emerged from among them to inaugurate a kingdom of love and justice. That is why many have trouble recognizing ^{him} ^{precisely} ^{and} The God who became flesh in Jesus is the hidden God of whom the prophets speak to us. Jesus shows himself to be such precisely in the measure that he is present via those who are the absent, anonymous people of history – those who are not the controllers of history, namely, the mighty, the socially acceptable, “the wise and the learned” (Mt. 11:25).

Christian faith is a historical faith. God is revealed in Jesus Christ and, through him, in human history and in the least important and poorest sector of those who make it up. Only with this as a starting point is it possible to believe in God. Believers can-

not go aside into a kind of dead-end corner of history and watch it go by. It is in the concrete setting and circumstances of our lives that we must learn to believe: under oppression and repression but also amid the struggles and hopes that are alive in present-day Latin America; under dictatorships that sow death among the poor, and under the “democracies” that often deal unjustly with their needs and dreams.

The Lord is not intimidated by the darkness or by the rejection of his own. His light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in the tent the Son has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now, and nourish our hope on the will to life that the poor of our continent are demonstrating. If we do so, we shall experience in our flesh the encounter with the Word who proclaims the kingdom of life.