

Second Sunday of Advent
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In 49 B.C., when the Roman Senate had become deadlocked by political squabbling and unable to govern the expanding empire, Julius Caesar staged a military coup and consolidated executive power in his own hands. Many suspected that he wanted to be king, so a group of men still loyal to the old republican form of government, along with some who could imagine themselves the next Caesar, assassinated Julius.

What followed was civil war. Cassius, Brutus, Mark Antony with the dubious help of Cleopatra turned Roman armies against each other. The winner was the sole survivor--Gaius Octavianus, the nephew of Julius Caesar. Everyone was so relieved that peace had been restored that the Senate proclaimed him Caesar Augustus and allowed him to rule by decree, Rome's first emperor. He was succeeded peacefully by his step-son Tiberius, who ruled from 14 to 37 A.D.

Who else was high and mighty at the time? Pontius Pilate served Tiberius as governor of Judea. Herod Antipas served Tiberius as tetrarch of Galilee, as his brother Philip did in Ituraea, and Lysanius did in Abilene.

On the religious scene the Romans were fairly tolerant. All they demanded of other pagans was to add the goddess Roma to their existing pantheons, no big deal, but this was not required of the Jews. The Jews were such trouble when you messed with their monotheism that they were allowed their temple worship of Yahweh alone, but Tiberius did appoint their high priests, toadies like Annas and Caiaphas.

So, for all intents and purposes, Tiberius Caesar seemed to have it all sewn up. Heaven was harnessed to the imperial program, and earth was administered by the Roman state. But in the fifteenth year of his reign the word of God came to a hermit named John, living in the desert of Judea on grasshoppers and wild honey.

John had not been approved by Tiberius Caesar, but he began to preach anyway, proclaiming the advent of a messiah who would shake up the status quo. And the messiah did, though not quite like the Baptist had expected. He did not challenge the right of Caesar to rule, but he did say "Do not give to Caesar what belongs to God." He did not object to Roman roads and harbors and commerce, but he did say "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" He did not incite his followers to fearless armed rebellion, but he did say "Do not fear them who can kill the body but can do no more."

In other words, Jesus Christ did shake up the status quo of worldly values. He still does. He poses a threat to any who want to rule not just the body but also the soul. Tiberius Caesar represents that drive-in human nature for total control, whether running an empire or one's own personal life. He also represents the high price paid by those who thirst for power.

When he was three years old his mother divorced his father to marry up and coming Octavianus, the future Caesar Augustus. When he was thirteen, he rode in Augustus' chariot when he returned triumphant to Rome after killing the last of his enemies in the civil wars. As a young man he served brilliantly in the military but was pushed into Roman politics to compete with others for the favor of Augustus. When he was thirty-one, he bowed to the request of Augustus to divorce his wife, whom he dearly loved, and marry into the imperial family; to a woman who loved Tiberius as little as Tiberius loved her, and who humiliated him with nighttime escapades in the forum.

At one-point Tiberius, disgusted with human nature, withdrew to the island of Rhodes, but the untimely deaths of men ahead of him in the succession dragged him back to Rome and made him emperor when Augustus died. As emperor he demanded good government, but the ruthless politics of the capital repulsed him and, grieving the death of his son, withdrew again-- this time to the island of Capri- after putting administrative duties in the hands of two praetorian prefects. But we all know what happens when the boss is too long away, and the prefect in charge began to conspire against Tiberius, who reacted swiftly. The man was executed along with everybody connected to him, a bloody purge that earned Tiberius a reputation for cruel tyranny.

Years later, as Tiberius lay on his death bed, his great-nephew and appointed successor Caligula was already being congratulated by supporters as the next emperor when word arrived that Tiberius was recovering. Caligula and an aid went to the sick room and smothered him with the bed sheets.

So, Tiberius Caesar—a reluctant emperor, a man of some personal virtue but overcome by the world in which he lived, a world without grace, in which human virtue drowned in the rising sewer of human vice. What did Tiberius really need? He needed God in his life. What did Pontius Pilate and Herod and Annas and Caiaphas need? They needed God in their lives. We see in them the high price of exalting oneself in a quest for total control. We see in them ourselves without God in our lives.

And in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert, and he began to preach, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!” Repent of all the pride and greed and lust, repent of the back-biting jealousy and back-stabbing ambition that alienates you from God and makes life a misery

for yourself and everyone around you, here and hereafter. Repent of it all, and it will all be forgiven. Then the Prince of Peace will come to dwell in your heart and give you the happiness that you constantly frustrate by trying to seize it on your own.