

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Christmas Day
December 25, 2017

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It is part of the historical record that the first person mentioned in the Christmas story was neither a Palestinian nor a Jew. He wasn't a shepherd or a wise man. And he never became a Christian. His name was Caesar Augustus. He lived 1500 miles away from the Holy Land, although the land wasn't holy for him! It was a remote and troublesome province of his vast Roman Empire. Augustus Caesar is in the story because a decision of his triggered a journey. An obscure Galilean couple set out to obey an edict requiring a census. And it all led to the birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem.

If it hadn't been for Augustus, Jesus would have been born at Nazareth, the hometown of Joseph and Mary. But as Saint Luke explains, there was an enrollment Augustus had decreed for his empire. This meant all subjects of Rome had to return to their ancestral homes for registration. Some scholars used to observe Rome never required her subjects to return to their original home villages for such enrollment. And so it was inferred St Luke got the story wrong. But all was changed by the discovery of a Roman census edict dating to 104 A.D. which required Egyptians living elsewhere to return to their ancestral homes for registration. Archeology vindicated St Luke.

Both Joseph and Mary were descended from King David. This meant they had to travel eighty miles to David's city, which was a sleepy little village six miles southwest of Jerusalem. The *Cunard Steamship Company* had a famous logo: "*getting there is half the fun.*" The Blessed Virgin Mary was not having that kind of trip getting to Bethlehem. Eighty miles on the back of a jogging donkey was not fun for a young woman who was "*great with child.*"

Christmas sermons rightly focus on the Birth of Jesus, the Holy Family, the shepherds, the angels, even the cattle and innkeeper. But the story also includes Augustus Caesar. He was the grandnephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. Augustus reigned forty-four years and it was an era marked by unprecedented peace and prosperity. The emperor presided over what has been called the *pax Augusta*. Among other things, this "peace of Augustus" made travel on the Mediterranean Sea and throughout Europe safe. The Roman army and navy took care of pirates and brigands, and the emperor's engineers built wonderful

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highways. The *pax Augusta* made it possible for Christianity to spread quickly in the years after Ascension Day and Pentecost. This adds fresh meaning to St Paul's famous phrase that Christ came "*in the fullness of time*" that is, when the time was right in God's eyes.

This is all background information for the census Augustus promulgated in an effort to monitor the success of his marriage laws and concerns for a falling birth rate. The census, of course, was also the basis for *taxation*. You can guess the tax was not part of the original promotion! You found out about that when you got home! One hundred years ago the United States Congress enacted the original Internal Revenue Code. It was a *temporary* measure to finance the Great War. And like anything else in government, it just grew and never looked back!

The Roman census returns did show an increase in the population. The emperor was pleased enough with the results that he listed his census as No. 8 in the list of the thirty-five "*Acts of Augustus*" for which he wished to be remembered. The *Acts of Augustus* were engraved on bronze plaques outside his mausoleum.

It is not likely Augustus Caesar ever examined the census returns from Bethlehem. But had he done so, he would have seen a group of three names: Joseph Ben-Jacob, carpenter; Miriam Bath-Ioachim, his wife; Yeshua, or Jesus, first-born son. Augustus never learned the significance of what happened in Bethlehem as a result of his decision to take a census. Augustus Caesar died when Our Blessed Lord was about nineteen years old and probably serving as an apprentice carpenter in Nazareth.

But Caesar Augustus, so proud of the acts of his reign, would have been utterly astounded to learn that later ages would not date his own death as 767 A.U.C. (*ab urbe condita* "from the foundation of the city" of Rome. Later ages would tell us the emperor died in 14 A.D. "*in the year of the Lord.*" And all because of that unknown subject of his in remote Bethlehem, *a first-born son called Jesus.*