

Important boring bit!

Luke 3.1-2

Lots of people who try reading the Bible from end to end find they get bogged down in some parts of the Old Testament which seem unutterably boring. I am thinking things like the long lists of heredity – So-and-so begat So-and so and so on and so on. The same applies to a lesser degree to the New Testament. The first half of the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel is taken up with the lists of those who were Jesus' ancestors. Despite genealogy being a popular hobby these days, those lists don't get read out in church, and I suspect most people rush over them when they read them privately.

We have a minor version of it in the Gospel reading for today. Let me remind you what it said: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

The previous two chapters of Luke have been about the birth stories, and Jesus early life, in so far as we have anything about it. Those of course will be read in millions of churches in a couple of weeks – much more popular than hearing about the rulers in Judea, Galilee Ituraea and Trachonitis (which always sounds like an unpleasant disease to me).

Many scholars think of those first two chapters as being quite separate from the main body of Luke – a sort of Preface to the real thing, as it were. So we could argue that these apparently boring bits are where Luke wants to focus our attention. I think there is a great deal to be gained from taking this bit seriously.

It is all too easy to forget that the stories of what Jesus said and did are not simply things written in a book, but word and deeds that happened at a particular time and place. Our faith is not one which is rooted in philosophical ideas (although we have plenty of those). It is rooted in history. Jesus wasn't a person in a book, but a person in history, living at a particular time and place, living in the context of the world's political and religious story at that exact time. Luke flags up the Roman hierarchy – introducing us to characters who would have a profound part to play in the story he is going to tell – Pontius Pilate and Herod especially. He was probably writing for educated Roman citizens. In a way he has a problem - the story will show how Jesus was executed on the authority

of a Roman official. But he doesn't want to alienate them. He wants to tell the story of a world faith, and how it will affect secular powers.

He also flags up the religious hierarchy as well – the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. That is one of those occasions when Luke shows his vagueness about Jewish matters. There was only ever one high priest at a time. Annas held the office from AD6-15, and then after some other his son-in-law Caiaphas succeeded in 18-36. However there is some evidence that Annas was the power behind the throne to some extent, so maybe Luke wasn't so wrong after all.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that Christianity is a world faith. The era of the New Testament was the time when Christians were separating out from Judaism – not without some difficulties, as we read in Acts. But he wanted to show that being a Christian was nothing to do with belonging to a particular race, or having a particular religious ancestry. It was a faith open to any who would embrace it.

In a world which continues to divide itself on racial and religious lines in so many ways, that is still something we have to offer. When we sing hymns like

'In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great family of love throughout
the whole wide earth.

John Oxenham in that hymn goes on to say:

Join hands then children of the faith
whate'er your race may be;
who serves my Father as his child
is surely kin to me.

It is that world-wide all-embracing message which demands that we are saying things about what it has to contribute when we are faced with racialism and religious prejudice. And that sadly is as much a common phenomenon today as it has ever been.

In today's New Testament reading Paul prays for the Christians in Philippi that their love 'will overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best.' One commentator has suggested that the words 'full insight' really mean 'common sense'. Our task is to use our common sense, as something given by God, to show what this world-wide message of love and hope is all about.