

Fourth Sunday of Advent, 22nd December 2019

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip his brother tetrarch of Iturea, and the country of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilina [...]” (Lk 3:1). Why this list of rulers at the start of chapter three of St Luke? Well, firstly, the Gospel narrative here jumps from the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple straight to the preaching of St John the Baptist in the desert, eighteen years later, when Christ was thirty. There has been a change of Roman emperor since then: Tiberius is “now in the fifteenth year”, so less than eighteen years into his reign. All the other rulers have changed from the last time Luke mentioned any. But, perhaps more significantly, the list provides an historical basis for the narrative and also heightens the historical importance of what is now taking place: the adult life of Christ, which will eventually end in his death and resurrection.

The first time St Luke has a similar chronological marker is immediately after his Prologue to Theophilus, and which as such begins the narrative proper: “There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zachary [...]” (Lk 1:5). Here we are introduced to the Baptist’s father. The “Herod” is Herod the so-called ‘Great’, who will go on to massacre the Holy Innocents at Bethlehem, in St Matthew’s Gospel. At the beginning of chapter two of Luke, which will be read at Midnight Mass, we will hear something similar: “And it came to pass, that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled. This enrolling was first made by Cyrinus, the governor of Syria” (Lk 2:1-2). And yet this is not so much a mentioning of the powers that be so as to place the Gospel story within history, but rather what they actually did as part of that story: “a decree from Caesar Augustus” and “enrolling [...] made by Cyrinus, the governor”.

When we come to the next chapter of St Luke, and today’s Gospel reading, the rulers are mentioned not for what they themselves might have done (though some of what a few of them did will be narrated later on) but, like Herod the Great right at the beginning of Luke (1:5), for where and what they ruled. It was self-evident what Tiberius Caesar ruled, and he will indeed make an appearance towards the end of the Gospel, albeit not in

person but on a coin (cf. Lk 20:24)! We will however encounter both Pontius Pilate and the other Herod, Herod Antipas, but hear of Philip his half-brother only in passing and never again of the names of his territories, “Iturea, and the country of Trachonitis” (Lk 3:1), and certainly nothing more of “Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilina”.

So why all of them? Well, a clue was just given there by Lysanias being described as a “tetrarch”. A “tetrarch” is the ruler of one fourth of a province – “τετρά” being the Greek word for the number “four”. After the Roman emperor, there therefore follows the four tetrarchs: “Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip his brother tetrarch of Iturea, and the country of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilina [...]” (Lk 3:1). Yes, I know: Pontius Pilate is not called a “tetrarch”, that is because the Romans directly ruled Judea, together with Samaria, through a “governor”. Following Herod the Great’s death, his territory was divided among his sons, not long after the birth of Our Lord. In Matthew, we read that St Joseph, “hearing that Archelaus reigned in Judea in the room of Herod his father, [...] was afraid to go thither: and being warned in sleep retired into the quarters of Galilee” (Mt 2:22). Herod Archelaus was as tyrannical as his father, so much so that he was deposed by the Romans and a governor put in his place.

Herod Antipas, Archelaus’ brother, however, remained in place as “tetrarch” not only “of Galilee” (Lk 3:1) but also of Perea, an area just east of the river Jordan. It was because St John was baptising in this area that he got into trouble with Herod the tetrarch for preaching against Herod taking Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip, one of the other tetrarchs, for which John was put into prison, later on in chapter three of Luke (cf. 19-20). To cut a long story short, as they say, this same Herod goes on to behead John and, when he hears about all the things which Jesus is doing, thinks that this must be John risen from the dead and is eager to see him for himself (cf. Lk 9:7-9).

Herod does in fact see Our Lord in the end, at the latter’s trial before Pilate, another of the rulers listed in today’s Gospel: “Pilate hearing Galilee, asked if the man were of Galilee? And when he understood that he was of Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him away to Herod, who was also himself at Jerusalem, in those days. And Herod, seeing Jesus, was very glad; for he

was desirous of a long time to see him, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to see some sign wrought by him. And he questioned him in many words. But he answered him nothing” (Lk 23:6-9). Pilate and Herod are therefore the two rulers involved in the trial of Christ, whose disciples, after his death, resurrection and ascension, (in St Luke’s sequel, the Acts of the Apostles) “lifted up their voice to God and said: [...] The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes assembled together against the Lord and his Christ. For of a truth there assembled together in this city against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel” (Ac 4:24, 26-27).

When we sing in the Creed that: “*sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est* (under Pontius Pilate he suffered and was buried)”, we are as such, like today’s Gospel, placing Christ within his proper historical context. Yes, Pilate had a hand in his death, yet so in sense did we, whether Jew or Gentile: “Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel” (Ac 4:27). Still, it was, nevertheless, all for us (*pro nobis*), and for us all: “*Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: sub Pontio Pilato* (He was crucified also for us: under Pontius Pilate) [...]”.

