

St Pius & St Anthony Homily Christmas Sunday Year A1

All this talk in the gospel about ‘census’, ‘enrollment’ & ‘registration’ has me thinking about lines from old war world two movies. I bet you’ve heard them, one about a captured soldier being interrogated, saying ‘Name, Rank & Serial Number’, or maybe some people approaching a road checkpoint and being told, “Present your papers”. Or hopefully in the last couple of hectic days before Christmas here, no one has heard someone dressed in blue say to you, “I need to see your license, proof of insurance and registration.” But, we all know what is up in each of these cases: it is all our identifying information. And that is like what is going on in the gospel—A whole Roman-empire wide (all of the known world) census is called. And ***a census is all about recording and registering names.*** Several names are called out & recorded in this reading today- let’s take a little ***census*** of the reading itself ourselves. Always with name lists, the question is asked, “Who is important? Who is the most significant?” There are some ***big*** names, how about Caesar Augustus (oooooh)-that name Augustus indicates like the best-est of the best-est (but is that really so?) or Quirinius (oooooh)- that name has his big title included ‘Governor’- sounds important, but isn’t for us. Now, that’s the roman side. Again, Big names, but not there is not too much interest for us from them. (and they are only mentioned once).

Interestingly and very important to us, but only mentioned once by name is Joseph. Similarly, Mary is mentioned by name, but only once. And now we are getting to the most important of all, how about Jesus? Did you hear His ***name***? No, He is not named yet. That will happen 8 days after birth according to Jewish custom when He is circumcised-that’s the formal occasion of naming (family claiming) of a child (*and Mary & Joseph will faithfully follow through on the angel’s command to name the child-Jesus-meaning ‘God saves’ Luke 1:31 & Luke 2:21*).

So, several people are named in our gospel reading, (keep in mind again that Jesus is not named yet). But I want to point out that of those named, each is named with only one mention, but did you hear, someone in this reading gets mentioned three times? Three times? Who is that? (more on him in just a minute)

Now, I grant that I’m being particular, about looking closely at the reading’s exact words and how many times each word is used. But I suggest that I’m being like the wise men, and I’m watching closely for the stars (in the A-list)!

But scripture interpreters do that; they pay attention to particular words, even to the extent of making very detailed counts of words in the passages under view. It might seem petty or picky that I am making big deal out of names and number of times names are mentioned, but I had an experience recently that brought this ‘focus on particular words’ home to me. Just over a week ago, our Lunch Bunch group played a great game together. It was a form of the game secret Santa. We started by individually going to the group table where everyone placed the gift that each of us brought, to pick out one gift-but we couldn’t pick the one you brought. Oh, this game is just getting started. Because then, we sat around in a circle of chairs (*knowing how it turned out that the gifts were going to be passed back and forth, all around this circle, maybe we should have called this game ‘Santa Roulette’*), and Mrs Dolly Bardsley led the game by reading a story about Frosty the Snowman. As we sat in a circle holding gifts, every time we heard the word ‘right’ in the storyline, we handed our gift off to the person on the right of us, and then when we heard the word left we shifted the gift we were holding, back to the person on the left of us. And one sentence could have multiple ‘lefts’ and ‘rights’ back to back-like Frosty **left** his hat as he **left** the room **right** after they started baking the cookies.’ The whole experience amounted to this: I am not sure what happened with the action in the story, I was so focused on not missing any uses of the word ‘right’ and ‘left’. Now that is some attention to detail.

So I thought I would apply that close watch, to this gospel reading about the census and the recording of names. So, do we recall whose name was mentioned three times in the gospel? (Keep in mind that Jesus is not named at all yet, and Joseph and Mary get only one mention) So, who got three mentions? It is David! Three times.... That’s a lot in only 14 verses. David...David ...David. Why David? Because everyone hearing about Jesus’ birth in this story, would know something immediately, already about this special savior-child being born just from David’s repeated mention. Especially to those shepherd-witnesses living in the field, David means everything. He is a shepherd exemplar-a shepherd of shepherds. David knows shepherding. Let’s remember some of David’s story about shepherding. He of all his brothers (sons of Jesse) was the one out there in the field working with his sheep like he should be, when the others were pushing each other out of way to try to get Samuel’s attention when Samuel came to the house to anoint the next king. David was into that-he loved his sheep and wanted

to care for them. Further, David is the good shepherd who could sit patiently with sheep and play music to them, getting them to rest from anxieties or he could get them to sleep (keep in mind that David alone was the one who could even soothe nerves of the unbalanced King Saul-1 Samuel 16:14-23). David, obviously knew his sheep so well by being with them so much, that he knew them by name and their exact number. The 23rd Psalm indicates that David knew where the best grass was for sheep to graze on, and he knew where to find the cleanest, clearest water for them to drink. He was as tender as could be with his sheep, healing their wounds and holding them when they were afraid. But David was also so strong, enough to ward off wolves or bandits, as he proved when he dropped Goliath with a simple shepherd's boy's sling (1 Samuel 17). David led his sheep. He knew them, and they hung upon his every word-his voice.

So, what do we make of all this mention of David in the gospel? It tells us that Jesus will be David, but even so much more than David! Luke is telling us what type of Savior Jesus will be. Jesus is a shepherd king. He will lead his people, loving his sheep, because he knows his own and will never forget his humble origin, born a little lamb among shepherds in a field. And those shepherds know that sign: wrapping the child in swaddling clothes just as they wrap newborn lambs being preserved for Temple sacrifice snugly protected and kept unblemished. Those shepherds heard loud and clear, such details (and it all happening on the hills around Bethlehem-David's city). Jesus will be the Savior-the Shepherd of shepherds. As Ezekiel 34 had prophesied of God himself saying, "I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest....The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal..." (Ezekiel 34:15-16). And Jesus Himself will put His name on that field-that flock-all of us later in John chapter 10:14, when he says, "I am the good shepherd" Jesus will name us as His own, He will claim us as His flock. And He will lay down his life for his sheep (really he does that twice- first here, laying down his life from eternity by being born here, sent from Father to take flesh among us on earth" and then later at His cross He will again lay down his life on earth by dying to shepherd us to new life. As the Good Shepherd ('the bestest'-'augustus'), He will feed us, lead us, heal us and most importantly "Save us", giving us a name that is eternal -as we bear his brand 'Christian', registering us as one of His flock! That is what most counts in this census story of Luke. We are recorded in Jesus' flock!