

# Two Kingdoms in a Manger

## The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Rome

The story of Christ's birth unfolds quietly—in a borrowed stable, among animals and shepherds, under a night sky pierced by song. It begins not in a palace, nor before the eyes of emperors, but in obscurity. In that surprising setting, Scripture invites us to see the clash of two kingdoms: the Kingdom of God revealed in the child Jesus, and the kingdom of Rome embodied in Caesar Augustus.

To read the Christmas story faithfully is not only to hear ancient poetry; it is to encounter a profound contrast that still shapes how Christians—especially Lutherans—understand the world today.

### 1. The Kingdom of Rome: Power, Peace, and Glory

When Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus ruled the Mediterranean world. His authority seemed absolute. His empire promised security, prosperity, and what it called *pax Romana*—"the peace of Rome." But this was a peace built on conquest, enforced by soldiers, funded by heavy taxation, and justified by propaganda, perpetuated by power.

Caesar was celebrated as **"savior," "lord," and "son of god."**

These titles were not merely flattering metaphors; they were the politics of religion and the religion of politics. Rome announced its good news with monuments and armies. Its message was clear: **Power makes peace. Strength makes truth. Empire makes the world right.**

The only question for ordinary people was where they belonged in the imperial order. Some prospered; most endured. Rome did not ask trust, it demanded allegiance.

### 2. The Kingdom of God: Vulnerability, Hope, and New Creation

Into this world comes Jesus. Not enthroned, but laid in a manger. Not welcomed by emperors, but by shepherds. Not announced with speeches, but with angel-song. Every detail of the nativity puts the Kingdom of God against the kingdom of Rome.

Rome's lord sits in marble halls; Israel's Messiah is cradled in a feed trough. Rome boasts armies; Jesus arrives in the arms of a young mother. Rome builds peace by the sword; Jesus brings peace through mercy and justice. The infant Jesus bears none of the marks of worldly power, yet he bears the fullness of God.

**The Kingdom of God begins not with force, but with love. Not with domination, but with self-giving. Not with a throne, but with a manger.**

This is the profound claim of Christmas: the Creator chooses vulnerability; the Almighty enters as a child.

The birth of Christ proclaims a kingdom where the lowly are lifted, the hungry fed, the stranger welcomed, and the sinner forgiven. True peace comes not through domination but through the healing presence of God among the world's wounded.

### 3. The Clash of Claims

Rome and Christ both proclaim “peace,” but they mean different things.

- **Rome’s peace** is the absence of conflict—secured by force.
- **God’s peace** is the presence of justice—secured by divine mercy.

Rome proclaims Augustus as savior by decree; the angels proclaim Jesus as Savior by grace. Rome demands taxes; Jesus brings good news to the poor. Rome builds roads and armies; Jesus builds community. Rome says, “Trust us or else.” Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.”

This is not accidental. The Gospels consciously place Jesus’ birth in the shadow of empire to show that God’s reign contradicts the world’s assumptions about power. The Christmas story is not sentimental; it is subversive.

### 4. How Lutherans Read This Story Today

Martin Luther taught that Christians live in **two kingdoms**: the worldly kingdom of law and order, and the spiritual kingdom of grace and gospel. We do not withdraw from society; we discern our place within it. But we confess only one Lord. Today, we inhabit a culture still enamored with power, spectacle, and self-assertion. We are told:

- Security is found in wealth.
- Importance is measured by success.
- Glory belongs to the strong.

Yet Lutherans read the manger and hear a different truth. The Kingdom of God comes hidden, under weakness, humility, and mercy. God appears not in the palaces of privilege but among the poor, the struggling, the overlooked. God is found not in domination but in crucified love.

Therefore:

- We resist equating prosperity with blessing.
- We resist confusing nationalism with faith.
- We resist imagining that God’s purposes are advanced by coercive force.
- We dismiss anyone believing they can bring peace through strength and manipulation.

As Lutherans, we look for God where God has promised to be: in Word and Sacrament, in the neighbor in need, in the unlikely places where grace takes root.

### 5. Living the Christmas Gospel

The question for us is not merely: *Do we believe the story?* The deeper question is: *Which kingdom do we live for?* If Christ is Lord, then every Caesar is not. If Christ reigns, then the church becomes an embassy of mercy in a world of might. We bear the gospel by:

- welcoming strangers,
- defending the vulnerable,
- feeding the hungry,
- speaking truth to power,
- living peaceably,
- forgiving generously.

None of these looks impressive to the world, but they are signs of the Kingdom that began in Bethlehem and was revealed fully on the cross. **The manger prepares us for the cross; the cross**

**prepares us for resurrection; the resurrection sends us into the world as citizens of God's new creation.**

### **Conclusion**

At Christmas, we do more than remember a birth; we proclaim a new kind of kingdom. One child in a manger is more true, more holy, more powerful than every empire. Rome is gone. Augustus is dust. But Christ lives.

So we watch for the places where the Kingdom of God is quietly unfolding—in hospitals, in food pantries, in congregations, in forgiveness exchanged, in bread broken, in peace offered. In the birth of Jesus, God shows that the world is saved not by the sword but by love and justice. This is the Christmas gospel. This is the way of the Kingdom.

Let us embody this Gospel now and always. Let us eschew our love of power and wealth. Instead, let us embrace love, grace and mercy in our everyday lives and let us show this society and the world in Christ, love can still be the light that guides all humanity.