

## ***Ask a Roman!***

A Christmas Reflection

*William Loader*

Ask Romans in Luke's world, "Who is the Son of God?" and they will point to the Emperor. Ask them: "Who is the bringer of peace?" They will answer: "The Emperor" and go on to explain that Rome's armies cleared land routes of bandits and their ships, the sea routes of pirates, bringing the *pax romana* (Roman peace) to the world, making travel and trade safe. Ask them: "So what is the good news?" The answer comes swift: "Our empire, our emperor, of course!"



*Emperor Domitian*

They will have been brought up on Rome's propaganda. Statues of emperors filled the streets and emperors' heads, their coins. Now it's your turn to tell your story. Your Roman friends begin to smile, then shake their heads in disbelief, when you talk about a baby in a Bethlehem house lying in an animal's eating trough and call him "Son of God" and his birth, "good news". Even more absurd, it seems, when you tell of angels in the sky singing songs and saying this baby will bring peace on earth. This is outrageous to their ears, even slightly offensive, because it turns the language of Rome's lofty claims upside down. It becomes worse when you tell them that he grew up only to die young, crucified like a common slave.

But that gives you the chance to explain. The baby story is not really about a baby at all. It is about who Jesus became, about his ministry. It was just like the stories which everyone knew were commonly made up about famous people including emperors, full of imaginary features like angels, earthquakes, miraculous births, and shining stars. "So what was so significant about him and why tell his baby story like that?" they ask.



"How long have you got?" You reply. You start with the way he reached out to people whom others had written off. His healings, his promises to the poor and hungry, his restoring the hopeless back to hope, his makeover of Zacchaeus to turn him from an exploiter to a generous giver, his embracing children, his respect for women, his crossing the boundaries of prejudice to affirm even despised Samaritans, making up a story of one who modelled God's generosity. You slip in the story he told to persuade people that God was as generous as a caring father for a wayward son. Greatness is not having power over others but having love for them.

"I suppose you'll tell us he was crowned a king!" quipped one in sarcasm. "Well, he was," you reply. "On a cross with a crown of thorns, king of the Jews." "But can't you see that was mockery?" came the response. How would you answer that? So you simply said: "It depends how you see it." Your Romans went away puzzled. You could have spoken of what God thought and how God gave an opinion three days later, but that could wait for another time.