



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church December 28, 2014

## Luke 2: 22-40

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For those with a questioning mind, there are plenty of questions about the Christmas stories. Mostly questions of why. Why the travel too or from Bethlehem? I realise the need to place Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem for his birth but the stories in Matthew and Luke have more to them than simple narrative devices. Why the poverty of the birth and the need for the manger? Why the Magi? Given the Old Testament condemnation of astrology, surely there were plenty of Romans around if you needed a Gentile witness to the birth of the Messiah? And on top of all of those, why then? This is the great question on the lips of Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Why did you come to such a backward time and such a strange land? If you'd come today you could have reached the whole nation. Israel in 4BC had no mass communication.

Why just then, out of all the centuries since the promise of salvation? Paul adds to this questioning, or rather prompts us further to questioning with his use of the phrase "in the fullness of time" when writing to the Galatians. So it's not just why then, but also, how is then the "fullness of time?"

Most likely Paul had no such question or concept in mind when he wrote the phrase, "fullness of time". For him the idea was that God's long promised plan of salvation had come to fulfilment. This was the fullness of God's time. However, the question still sits there from our point of view. Looking back over 2 millennium, and even further, maybe 3 or 4 millennium with our historical interest in antiquity and the Old Testament, Paul's phrase becomes quite interesting to the questioning mind. In what way was the reign of Emperor Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria and Herod the Great king of Judea, the fullness of time? In writing *Jesus Christ Superstar* Tim Rice only brought out the negatives of Jesus being born in Judea in 4 BC, to get a better idea of why this can be seen as the fullness of time, let's look at the positives.

The first is Israel itself. A few centuries earlier than Jesus we have the Maccabean revolts against the Greek rulers, divided as they were after the great conquests of Alexander. While the desire for God's action was high, it was still very much framed in military terms. The people, and particularly the leadership, were set on a new kingdom under a Jewish king. In Jesus time, while many still thought that way, the response to John the Baptist and the busyness of the temple point to a different attitude. I know that each year at

Palm Sunday we talk of the military expectations of the people, but the truth is the Zealots were not a great movement at that time. Four hundred years of foreign rule had turned a large proportion of the population to thoughts of spiritual salvation and the crowds who listened to Jesus attest to that. And of course, a generation after Jesus and Jerusalem is destroyed after the Romans get sick and tired of the persistence of the Zealots, doing to Israel what they had done to all the other nations that they had conquered – silence the local religion. This narrow window between the conquering of Judea by the Romans and the destruction of Jerusalem was indeed the fullness of time for the coming of Jesus.

The second is Roman rule itself. At no other time in the history of the people of God was Judea so connected to the rest of the known world. With established travel routes and roads, all protected and guaranteed by the greatest military power of the ancient world, messages and ideas and people could travel vast distances with relative ease. The vast collection of Jews from around the world who were assembled at Jerusalem on that momentous first Christian Pentecost is a testimony to the travel possibilities of the Roman Empire. Paul himself benefitted greatly from the ubiquitous nature of the Empire, not just from the travel that he made a cornerstone of his ministry, but the protection he had as a citizen of Rome. None of that would have been as easy or even possible a couple of centuries earlier under the Greeks. They controlled nowhere near the same geographical area and had nothing like the same infrastructure. More than a narrative convenience to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the Romans become the ideal international culture for the new faith in Jesus Christ to spread far and wide out of Judea. Some might see the Romans as a negative, given the extreme persecutions of the Early Church, but those persecutions arose because this new faith had travelled so far and been so well received in this vast, multicultural Empire. Just think, before Paul had even got to Greece, there was a fledgling church in Rome! For the spread of the faith in Jesus Christ, this was indeed the fullness of time.

The third was the Jewish Diaspora. The succession of conquerors of Judea – Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and then Romans – had led to refugees and deportations all around the Mediterranean. Their continued faithfulness away from Jerusalem and the Temple had given us the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures – and supplied a ready audience for Paul and others as they carried the message of the arrival of the long promised messiah. It was not just their presence in the nations but their absorption of other cultures and ideas that allowed the message to find a ready audience. For the priesthood in Jerusalem it may not have been right but for many in Judea and the Diaspora it was indeed the fullness of time for God to act for the salvation of all humankind.

As I said, Paul probably had none of that in mind when he wrote the phrase “fullness of time”. This is all from the benefit of hindsight, although Paul did take full advantage of his

Roman citizenship and wrote that we should pray for peace so that the Gospel can be carried and spread. No one at the time thought that God should act just now as it is the most favourable time in history, it was just the point of fulfilment of God's plan. In that sense the 'fullness of time' works as a description both for the appropriateness from history's point of view, and for an acknowledgement of the omniscience of God. And there is the Gospel for us today – so many look to the world for "the fullness of time" for the coming kingdom. Not so much as looking for signs of God's actions but judging the right time for God to act. Surely now Lord, the church is declining and may be gone, the environment is a disaster and won't support us for much longer, the rise of religious extremism and terrorism is killing the Gospel; surely the fullness of time is now. But the Gospel says time is in God's hands and we are to be like Simeon and Anna, called to patience and worship. Even if we think we can see all the signs and the indicators, so many are looking for something like a repeat of Jesus in Judea when scripture is lifting our eyes to something different and amazing and indescribable. Just as the first time was unexpected and leaves us with all those 'why' questions so we are left with faith and discipleship like Mary, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna and allow God to work out what and when the fullness of time may be.