



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel today begins with a series of names and places. Some names are familiar (Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas, Judea, and Galilee), but some might not be so familiar (Philip the tetrarch, Ituraea, Lysanias, and which one of the six Herods is Luke referring to?!). Luke is very purposeful in this, though. He is writing to the Greeks and is well aware of the mythology of their religions. He is placing the Gospel in stark contrast to the Greek myths. How so? The Greek myths happen in a sort of “once upon a time,” not in history. St. Luke is grounding the Gospel in history – in this particular time, at this particular place, when these well-known people were in authority. The Gospel is not a myth. It is not legend. It is history.

This is important for us, because many in the world today would love to make Jesus a mythical figure. There are some who even deny that Jesus existed, even though there are more historical records (biblical and non-biblical) that Jesus existed than that Socrates existed. Jesus is not a myth. He really lived. He really was crucified. We believe, as Christians, that He really rose from the dead. For an excellent argument for the validity of the historicity of the Gospels, I invite you to go to Dr. Brant Pitre’s *A Case for Jesus* – we gave the book away a few years ago, and there is a video series free on [FORMED.org](http://FORMED.org) (to sign up for FORMED, go to [pelham.formed.org](http://pelham.formed.org)).

St. John the Baptist is introduced in today’s readings (and we’ll hear more about him next weekend), calling for the need for repentance. He saw himself as the forerunner (the “voice of one crying out in the desert” [Luke 3:4]). He was a witness to Jesus (recognizing that Jesus was the Messiah), and that he had to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming.

Last week, I talked in my homily about preparing for the Lord’s coming – at Christmas, at the end of time, and at Holy Communion. St. John’s call to repentance (to turn our lives away from sin and embrace the path toward God) invites us also to repent – but, more than that, to examine our own relationship with Jesus. Are we affected by the world that questions Jesus’ Divinity? I would say that very often *we are*. We are surrounded by an age of skepticism, and even in our belief, we can live as practical atheists.

What does that mean? To be a practical atheist means that even though we profess with our lips the belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even though we believe it in our minds, we live our lives as if there is no God. We live as if God is a myth. This is so easy to do. We say we believe that God is a loving Father, yet we so easily strive to fill our emptiness with the pleasures of the world – food, drink, drugs, sex, entertainment, shopping, power, etc.. When this is our focus, we say by our actions, “I don’t believe God is going to fill my emptiness.” I’m not saying that pleasure is bad. Too often, though, we run from the discomfort of loneliness, emptiness, and pain into the arms of the pleasures of the world, instead of running to the arms of our Father, asking Him to show us how we are to grow through those struggles, and asking Him to be our fulfillment.

As we prepare for the coming(s) of Christ, let us take this Advent to examine our lives, our relationship with Jesus, and what we really believe about Him. Let us ask Him for the grace and strength to trust His love, and to choose to act as believers, not as practical atheists.