

## Historical background of Rome

- Founded in 753 BC - according to tradition by twin brothers Romulus & Remus who founded the city on the site where they were suckled by a she-wolf as orphaned infants.
- After 200 years of being ruled by kings, in 510 BC a political revolution transformed the government into a "*Republic*" with aristocratic and democratic elements - with a deep hostility to "one-man rule." Power now resided in the hands of the Senate which was dominated by the upper classes.
- In the 1st century BC the republic was blown apart by civil wars making it ripe for a strong-man ruler. That man was Julius Caesar (born 102 BC) who was a celebrated soldier. His rule lasted less than a year and he was assassinated in 44 BC by a group of Senators who still believed in a Republic. The ring leaders were Brutus & Cassius.
- Caesar's death did not restore the Republic and resulted in fresh civil wars. Julius Caesar's young nephew and adopted son **Octavius Caesar** rose up, defeated Brutus & Cassius along with other rivals, and assumed supreme power in 31 BC.
- In 27 BC he was given the title "**Augustus**" (*exalted one*) by the Senate. Our month August is named after him.
- Caesar Augustus was the greatest of all Roman Emperors and under his 45 year rule he brought peace, stability, justice, and civilization to a war-torn world. His reign lasted from 31 BC to AD 14 (Cf. Luke 2:1).

### The Roman Empire:

**A common economy** - The coastal cities of the empire were brought together by trading with each other which facilitated the dissemination of news and an economic interdependence (i.e Italian wine was traded for North African grain to feed the populace of Rome)

**A common intellectual culture** - dominant culture was not Roman but Greek in terms of language and culture thanks to the conquests of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC). The world was "Hellenized" ("Hellas" is Greek for "Greece."). Latin spoken in the western part of the Empire but the educated classes spoke Greek.

**Traditional pagan religions** - the worship of a family of gods headed up by Zeus / Jupiter. People offer various sacrifices in an attempt to obtain the blessings of the various gods who ruled in the affairs of life (agriculture, business, marriage, politics, and war. the emperor was the high priest "pontifex maximus" of traditional religions.

**Emperor worship** was also essential to the cohesion of such far flung empire where people were expected to offer sacrifice to the "genius of the emperor" i.e. the divine power behind him. When an emperor died they were raised by the Senate to the status of actual gods.

**Eastern mystery cults** - such as Cybele (Asia Minor), Isis (Egypt), Mithras (Persia) were popular at the time of Jesus. These cults appealed to the senses through song, dance, music, public processions, religious feasting, ritualistic animal sacrifices and sexual immorality. Worshippers fell into trances and prophecy as a part of their worship. The mystery cults offered immortality to the followers which was something traditional paganism and emperor worship had no provision for.

**Philosophy** - was a way of life for the educated classes that promised peace and fulfillment. Named after the Greek Athenian philosopher **Plato** (427-347 BC). He was the most religious of the philosophies and essentially taught that God as the Supreme Being, whose eternal "ideas" in His mind was the source of everything in the Universe. According to Platonists (His followers) the human soul was eternal in its essence and was the source of true worth or value. They interpreted the spiritual life as a war between body (temporal) and spirit (eternal). Platonism afflicted many in the early centuries of the Christian church.