

GOD WITH US BY VIRGIN BIRTH

Luke 1v26-38

Over the next two Sundays we will be considering the Virgin Birth of Christ, as we look at Luke's Gospel 1v26-38. Strictly speaking we are talking about virgin conception. Nevertheless we will refer to "Virgin Birth".

Matthew and Luke's Gospels are where we find the Virgin Birth stories. They are two independent accounts which match perfectly, so they are powerful testimonies. But there is a conspicuous silence elsewhere in the New Testament about the Virgin Birth. Mark and John make no mention of it. In 'Acts' the Virgin Birth was not included in apostolic gospel preaching. There is no discussion of the Virgin Birth in the writings of Paul, and it is never used as evidence for the divinity of Jesus or referred to in relation to the incarnation.

Nevertheless the Virgin Birth cannot be ignored in any study of the Doctrine of God. According to Luke and Matthew's narratives God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were at work in this mysterious event.

From the earliest years of church history the Virgin Birth of Christ was accepted truth and fundamental Christian Doctrine. Hence we find it in the great Christian Creeds and Confessions of Faith. The Apostles Creed, for example, declares "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.*"

- Liberal Theology

But in the last two centuries this doctrine has come under severe attack and many today dismiss it. Why is this? We need to understand why, in order to reaffirm our confidence in this great truth.

The Virgin Birth was accepted by most Christians without question until the nineteenth century when German rationalism began to affect Biblical interpretation. Then it became a key issue in the debate about the supernatural and the divinity of Jesus. Liberalism sought to de-supernaturalise the Christian faith and also reinterpret Jesus as no more than a uniquely godly man. And so the Virgin Birth became fair game for scepticism.

The twentieth century continued in the same vein. Some high profile churchmen openly refuted the doctrine. The Methodist Lord Soper said: "*I do not believe in the Virgin Birth. The reality of Christianity for me is that Jesus began as I began. He does not come to me as a supernatural being from another sphere.*" Anglican Bishops like John Robinson (Woolwich) and David Jenkins (Durham) were also outspoken on this issue.

One incident even caused the subject to hit the headlines. David Jenkins publicly cast doubt on both the Virgin Birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ on national television. Then three days after his consecration as Bishop of Durham in York Minster on 6th July 1984 the cathedral was struck by

lightning causing a disastrous fire. This was headlined as the Divine displeasure!

Others came to the conclusion that it didn't really matter. Mervyn Stockwood said: *"I am not concerned with arguing the pros and cons of the Virgin Birth, whether you regard it as factually true or meaningful myth seems to me to be comparatively unimportant."* Biblical scholars like E. J. Young were among a minority who swam against this strong tide in arguing for the Virgin Birth in his commentary on Isaiah. Today there are many more Biblical theologians who hold firmly to the literal truth of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

So you can see that the Virgin Birth has become a battle ground with the two central issues being: does God act in supernatural ways, and is Jesus God the Son? This week and next these two issues will surface as we look at Luke's account.

- Roman Catholic Doctrine

While Liberal theologians have been reluctant to go all the way with Scripture, at the other extreme, the Roman Catholic Church has made the Virgin Birth the basis of doctrines which go beyond Scripture. This has led to the veneration of the Virgin Mary, and what came to be referred to as Mariology.

By the late second century the idea of the *Perpetual Virginity of Mary* had become standard doctrine. This maintained that the Christ Child was born in such a way that, medically, Mary remained a virgin; and thereafter she had no sexual relations with Joseph. Reference to Jesus' brothers and sisters in the Gospels are understood to be reference to cousins.

Then there is the Roman Catholic doctrine of *"The Immaculate Conception of Mary"*: This is not about the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb, but Mary's own conception in *her* mother's womb. "Immaculate" means she is believed to be wholly free from any taint of sin. Roman Catholicism edged towards this position over centuries, until in 1661 Pope Alexander VII pronounced. *"Mary's soul, in the first instant of its creation, and infusion into the body, by special grace and in consideration of the merits of Christ, was preserved immune from all stain of original sin."*

Around 320 AD Mary came to be described as *"theotokos"*, *"Mother of God"*. To begin with this was used in defence of the Divinity of Christ, but it came to have a very different emphasis. Mary, it was said, has a position more exalted than any other creature, because she enabled the birth of God the Son. Her condition was "full of grace." Like Jesus she was understood to be without sin, preserved from corruption, resurrected, received into heaven in glory and crowned "Queen of Heaven" where she has now assumed the roles of intercessor and mediator.

By the twelfth century Mariology included the belief that she had a redemptive part to play not only in the birth of Christ but also in the death of Christ. While Jesus offered his sinless person to take God's wrath upon Himself, Mary

worked in harmony with Him offering up her prayers. Because Mary was indispensable to God's redemptive activity, so the argument goes, she is indispensable to the final spiritual perfection of every person. She is therefore "*co-redemptrix*" along with Christ.

So, this week and next we will focus on Luke 1v26-38 which gives us Mary's perspective on the *Annunciation*, literally, the "Announcement" that she will bear the Christ Child. However, our focus will not be on Mary but on God, in this mysterious and awe inspiring event.

1. God the Father initiated the Virgin Birth.

v26-28: In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee The appearance of angels in the Bible always signals some momentous event. It should come as no surprise then that the birth narratives overflow with angelic visitations. But here it is no ordinary angel. It is **the angel Gabriel**. In Scripture Gabriel is very special. He had been sent to Daniel in exile in Babylon. Jewish literature refers to him as an archangel, one of the "angels of the presence" who stand before God's throne. In the birth narratives he appears to Zechariah to announce the birth of Christ's forerunner John, and introduces himself with the words "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God." (Luke 1v19)

Now he appears to **a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.** The text leaves us in no doubt that Mary was a virgin. This is the second reference to this. **The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."** The angel Gabriel's first message is a personal greeting from God Himself. Imagine that in your Christmas post! The message is one of grace – God's grace. Leon Morris points out "*It is, of course, a complete misunderstanding which translates the words 'Hail Mary, full of grace', and understands them to mean that Mary was to be a source of grace to other people. Gabriel is saying simply that God's favour rests on her.*" Mary was a blessed woman: "Blessed are you among woman" (Luke 1v42) God's favour rested upon her.

v29-32: Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary. "Do not be afraid". This often seems to be the first thing angels say to men or women, for obvious reasons. Most of us would be "greatly troubled" (in other words terrified!) if a mighty angel was to appear in our room.

You have found favour with God. The Virgin Birth is all about God's grace. God the Father is initiating this great event. He is not in a distant heaven or on the sidelines of human history. He is the Creator who is involved with His creation. So, here in the text it is God who sends the angelic messenger. It is God who is showing favour. God is setting something in motion.

We are helpless to save ourselves. Nothing less than a mighty initiative and intervention by God in human history is necessary for you and for me. The

Virgin birth declares that the coming of Christ into the world needed something supernatural to occur; something completely out of the ordinary. It underlines that salvation is entirely God's initiative. It *"points to the helplessness of man to initiate even the first step in the process. Not only is man unable to secure his own salvation, but he could not even introduce the Saviour into human society."* (Millard J. Erickson)

And God the Father always needs to take the initiative with you and me, personally. We need God to reveal Himself to us; to break in to our life. Malcolm Muggeridge was one of my favourite broadcasters and writers. He tells how he came to believe in Jesus in the most unexpected ways and most surprising places. He describes how his dream of paradise on earth – Communism, died on a visit to Moscow. Instead Christ became real to him at an Easter service in Kiev, *"when the collectivisation famine was in full swing, and Bernard Shaw and newspaper correspondents were telling the world of the bursting granaries and apple-cheeked dairy-maids in the Ukraine. What a congregation that was, packed in tight, squeezed together like sardines! I myself was pressed against a stone pillar, and scarcely able to breathe. Not that I wanted to particularly. So many grey, hungry faces, all luminous, like an El Greco painting; and all singing. How they sang – about how there was no help except in You, nowhere to turn except to You; nothing, nothing, that could possibly bring any comfort except You. I could have touched You then. You were so near..... It was strange in a way that I should thus have found myself nearest to You in the land where for half a century past the practice of the Christian religion has been most ruthlessly suppressed; where the very printing of the Gospels is forbidden, and You are derided by all the organs of an all-powerful State."*

He experienced the same in the Holy Land while making programmes for the BBC, visiting shrines like that of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. *"I realised in the first place that many shrines, and the legends associated with them, were for the most part, from my point of view, as fraudulent as the bones of Peter, the fragments of the True Cross and other relics revered by the pious. Then, seeing a party of Christian pilgrims at one of those shrines, their faces bright with faith, their voices as they sang so evidently and joyously aware of their Saviour's nearness, I understood that for them the shrine was authentic. Their faith made it so. Similarly, I, too, became aware that there really had been a man, Jesus, who was also God – I was conscious of his presence."* (Malcolm Muggeridge. 'Jesus Rediscovered.' Collins. 1969)

God had taken the initiative with him Muggeridge when he had least expected it – in a bastion of atheism and a shrine that struck him as "fraudulent". When this happens it is always an act of grace on God's part. Mary needed this grace, and so do you and I. This Christmas could be a special time of grace for you, or those you know; perhaps even for some of your friends who come to the Christmas Family Service.

The Virgin Birth was the way God chose to initiate His great rescue plan for the whole of the human race - which brings us to the central issue of theological significance in the Virgin Birth.

2. God the Son became incarnate by the Virgin Birth.

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High”. At the heart of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is the incarnation: literally *‘in carnis’* (“in flesh”). God the Son became a flesh and blood human being in Jesus.

This is a great wonder and mystery. “The Word became flesh” God Himself became a baby. G. K. Chesterton wrote: *“God, who had been the circumference, was seen as a centre, and a centre is infinitely small.”*

- Jesus is the Son of the Most High.

V32: He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. “The Most High” (Elyon) is one of the great titles of God. Jesus is the Son of God.

This is one of the great themes of John’s Gospel. While it is true that John includes no details of Christ’s Virgin Birth, he goes back even further than that!

Jesus is the “only begotten” of the Father. He is “the Son”, the Word who was with God in the beginning, and who enjoyed glory with the Father before time began. He had a life as the Son with the Father before he was born.

Now this mighty pre-existent Son becomes flesh. This child is human, born of a woman; and yet He is also the Son of the Most High. Jesus is true God and true Man, and therefore the perfect mediator between God and man.

- Jesus is the Son of David

V32, 33: The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. After “Son of the Most High”, “Son of David” feels like an anti-climax! But this is a precise description of the longed for King Messiah; the fulfilment of centuries of prophetic hope.

It started in 2 Samuel 7 where Nathan brought a message from God to King David, who had wanted to build a Temple for God in Jerusalem. God said “no”. Instead *He* would build a “house” for David. “Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” But this promise was also focussed in one person - a righteous King; a great King Messiah who would rule in triumph.

David’s son Solomon built the temple, but the promise of an eternal throne did not find fulfilment in him. But every generation was now on the alert. When would he arrive? Who would he be? The Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer writes in his commentary on ‘Isaiah’: *“Every next king in David’s line was the*

focus of longing that he would be the messiah, and every actual king was guardian of that longing inasmuch as he might be the Messiah's father."

Over the next two hundred years, the prophets spoke of this mysterious King, invoking the name of David when referring to him. e.g. Jeremiah 23v5: "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. " No wonder people longed for the arrival of this Davidic King.

Yet after two centuries still no Messiah King had arrived. Would this great son of David ever come? Was the promise a false hope?

Yet prophecies concerning this great King were never watered down. On the contrary, they sharpened and became more extraordinary. We can see this in the great Messianic birth prophecies.

Micah 5v2: The prophet Micah cited Bethlehem (the city of David) as the birthplace of the King Messiah. But his origins would be "from everlasting". "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, (i.e. the City of David) though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Isaiah 9v6,7: Isaiah even ennobled this Davidic King Messiah with titles appropriate to God alone. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever."

And Isaiah also prophesied a Virgin Birth. **Isaiah 7v14:** "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." Once again, the background to this is the hope of the Messiah King.

A King of Judah called Ahaz, was hard pressed by enemies and began to arrange alliances with foreign powers to come to his rescue. The prophet Isaiah urged him to trust God and reminded him of the promise to David, and even offered a sign from God to confirm all this. "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

But Ahaz refused. So the prophet announced a sign anyway – but one which would be for a future generation not his own – concerning the arrival of the son of David, the King Messiah: "Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

The full sign awaited the birth of Jesus. Matthew quotes the prophecy in his Gospel. "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the

prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" - which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1v22,23)

At last, the Son of David, the Messiah King had arrived.

God the Son became incarnate by the Virgin Birth: the Son of the Most High and son of David.

3. God the Spirit brought about the Virgin Birth.

v34: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" Mary now affirms that she *is* a virgin. It is the basis of her consternation. "How can this be?" **v35: The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.** In these words we see the two ways in which the Holy Spirit was active in the Virgin Birth of Christ.

- The Holy Spirit caused the conception of Jesus

In Matthew 1v18,19 we read: *"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly".*

Because Matthew wrote for a Jewish readership he answered the question "What could possibly explain Joseph's reluctance to divorce Mary?" Joseph and Mary were betrothed; in our terms this was more serious than engagement but less than marriage itself. Betrothal was a serious vow to keep oneself for the other pending marriage. But Mary was now pregnant. Joseph knew he wasn't responsible. So who was?

The natural assumption would be that Mary had been unfaithful to him, and had been with another man. To keep his good name Joseph would have to issue a bill of divorce – that's how serious betrothal was. If he didn't divorce her it was tantamount to an admission that he was the father and therefore a fornicator. In the circumstances Joseph would need nothing less than a sign from heaven to stop him divorcing Mary. And that is exactly what he got – an angelic visitation, telling him of the unique circumstances behind Mary's pregnancy. "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. " (v20)

No human father was involved. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she conceived the child. Mary needed to be a virgin because God's Spirit must be the first to move upon her in this intimate way. Thus, Jesus was "Son of the Most High".

The Biblical narrative does not bear the marks of a fable. He was conceived in a human womb, not sent down fully formed in a parcel from heaven. God did not bypass the human process of conception and birth. Jesus was conceived

by the Holy Spirit, but He grew in the womb of a woman and was delivered like every other baby. The *miracle* was that the conception was not by sexual intercourse with a man - but by God's Holy Spirit coming upon her.

This is described with great delicacy in Luke's account. **The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.** The word "overshadow" is used of God's presence resting or settling on the tabernacle in the cloud (Exodus 40v35) and in Psalm 91v4 of God protecting his people ("He will cover you with his presence").

C.S. Lewis writes of the normal function of a man in conception: "A microscopic particle of matter from his body, and a microscopic particle from the woman's body, meet. And with that there passes the colour of his hair and the hanging lower lip of her grandfather and the form of humanity in all its complexity of bones, sinews, nerves, liver and heart.

Behind every spermatozoon lies the whole history of the universe: locked within it lies no inconsiderable part of the world's future. The weight or drive behind it is the momentum of the whole interlocked event which we call Nature up-to-date. And we now know that the "laws of Nature" cannot supply the momentum. If we believe that God created Nature that momentum comes from Him.

The human father is merely an instrument, a carrier, often an unwilling carrier, always simply the last in a long line of carriers - a line that stretches back far beyond his ancestors back to the creation of matter itself. That line is in God's hand. It is the instrument by which he normally creates a man. But once, for a special purpose, He dispensed with that long line which is His instrument; once His life-giving finger touched a woman without passing through the ages of interlocked events. Once the great glove of Nature was taken off His hand. His naked hand touched her.

There was of course a unique reason for it. That time He was creating not simply a man but the Man who was to be Himself; was creating Man anew: was beginning at this divine and human point, the New Creation of all things. The whole soiled and weary universe quivered at this direct injection of essential life – direct, uncontaminated, not strained through all the crowded history of Nature." (C. S. Lewis. 'Miracles'. Fontana)

- The Holy Spirit preserved the sinlessness of Jesus

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God". (RSV). This raises the issue of Christ being without sin. According to the Bible all human beings inherit legal guilt and a corrupt moral nature from their first father Adam. But Jesus was conceived with an unfallen human nature. He is the Son of God the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit.

His sinlessness is absolutely vital for our salvation. **You are to give him the name Jesus.** This means "The Lord is Salvation." You are to give him the

name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1v20) Only if Jesus is without sin can He be the spotless Lamb of God taking away our sins. Only then can He be the second Adam, the head of a new redeemed humanity. The Holy Spirit's work in conception, preserving Christ's holiness, made this possible.

But would Jesus not inherit a sinful nature from Mary? It was this question which led to the Roman Catholic doctrine of 'The Immaculate Conception' of Mary, which maintained that she was conceived untainted by original sin. The text of Scripture honours the mother of Jesus, but puts Christ's holiness down to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than Mary. Her virginity was essential for the Spirit's work in conception but it was not the reason for Christ's holiness. That was the Holy Spirit's doing. Mary was marked out for special favour by God, but it was not her personal purity that caused Jesus to be without sin. Christ was "*holy*" at conception because of the *Holy* Spirit's work

v36-38: Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." This great statement brings us back to where we started. Does God act in supernatural ways?

Louis Cassels says, "*It is simply absurd in my opinion to argue that the Author of the universe, the Creator Spirit, who invented the whole process of procreation, cannot set it aside and bring a human life into being by other means any time He chooses to do so.*" **Nothing is impossible with God.**

We can also miss the obvious. "*The Virgin Birth meshes harmoniously with the rest of the New Testament message about Jesus.*" (J.I. Packer) Jesus entered the world by a miracle, and left the world by a miracle (the ascension) In between he worked miracles, including raising the dead, calming storms, turning water into wine, and then was, Himself, raised from the dead. Should we not expect the coming of God into the world to be unique and extraordinary? Being born of a virgin made Him the unique Person He was and is.

Nothing is impossible with God. He is a God of the miraculous. As we have already noted, the coming of Christ into the world needed something *supernatural* to occur. We were helpless to save ourselves. Nothing less than a mighty initiative and intervention of God was necessary. That is what happened in the Virgin Birth.

We will never fully comprehend or be able to explain the deep mystery of the Virgin Birth. But we can believe. And if you anyone is still tempted to scepticism, be challenged by Mary's response. **v38: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said"**. This is a good place for us to be concerning this great truth. "May it be as you have said, Lord". We believe in the Virgin Birth.

John Wilthew. December 2006.