

The Virgin Birth Luke 1:26-38

Our gospel reading today is about the virgin birth. Some of us, including myself, have been taught that doctrine for as long as we can remember and so the astonishing impact of the event has been weakened. Others have come to faith as an adult from no Christian background at all and so the facts must be far more difficult to accept. Can it really be true that a young girl became pregnant without having had sexual relations with a male? I mean let's face the reality head on. If you have a young unmarried daughter and you discovered she was pregnant and she said that she had not had sex with anyone, would you believe her? I very much doubt it, however much you love her; it just doesn't add up.

I think we need to be as realistic as that if we are to expect others to believe it too. So let's consider the matter so that we may know whether we really do believe it or not.

First, we must accept that for such a crucial claim, Scripture says very little indeed about it. Of the four gospels only two of them, Matthew and Luke, mention it. The first reference Mark makes to Jesus is when he is about thirty and suddenly appears on the scene being baptised in the Jordan by John the Baptist. The gospel of John goes right back to before creation and describes Jesus as 'the Word'; the self-expression of God who has always existed and then, like Mark, goes to the baptism of Jesus as an adult.

It is Luke who gives the greatest detail, recounting how the angel Gabriel came to Mary to tell her that God had chosen her and that, as a direct consequence of the operation of the Holy Spirit, she will conceive a male child who is to be named Jesus.

Matthew does refer to the virgin birth but tells the story from Joseph's point of view. He says nothing about the angel

coming to Mary, rather he speaks of an angel coming to Joseph (and that not directly, but in a dream) to tell him that Mary has not been unfaithful to him, the child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And that's it; there is no other mention of the virgin birth in the whole of the New Testament.

So what about the Old Testament? There is the famous prophecy in Isaiah that a virgin will conceive and bring forth a son. In fact Matthew actually quotes that passage to show that the virgin birth of Jesus was a fulfilment of that prophecy.

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." [Mat 1:22/3]

Yes, there is that prophecy but, to be honest, Matthew pushes it a bit to make his point. Isaiah wasn't speaking about a virgin birth specifically; that isn't the point he wanted to make. Let me remind you of the context. King Ahaz was on the throne of Judah when two other nations came marching up to the gates of Jerusalem to attack it. King Ahaz was alarmed and Isaiah is sent by God to meet him in the street with this message: "You do not need to worry. God will deal with these two nations. As proof of this you can ask God for a sign and he will give it to you." King Ahaz puts on a show of pious humility and says, "I wouldn't presume to ask God for a sign." Isaiah despises such hypocrisy and says, "If you won't *ask* for a sign, nevertheless the Lord will give one. A young woman is about to conceive a child – a son. Before he is old enough to know right from wrong, the Lord will have laid waste the land of the two kings who have come up to attack you and whom you fear."

Now notice that the emphasis of that sign is nothing to do with a virgin birth but that the child who is only now about to be conceived will not have grown old enough to choose between right and wrong before those two nations will be reduced to

nothing. The word translated ‘virgin’ does not necessarily carry the meaning it has for us (although it may do), it covers a wider field and may refer to any young woman. Indeed several commentators believe it may well refer to Isaiah’s own young wife and he is telling King Ahaz, “We are about to have a baby and well before he can make up his mind about what is right and wrong, God will have dealt with your attackers; and because in this context the conception of the child is to be a sign that God will deal with our enemies I am going to name him Emmanuel – God is with us.”

Of all the Gospels Matthew’s is the most Jewish; he wrote it to try to convince his own nation of the truth he had come to believe, that Jesus is the Long awaited Messiah. To pick that rather obscure reference in Isaiah and use it as a proof text to make his point may not carry much credibility for us westerners today, but that is a particularly Jewish way of arguing. Taking the words of the law and the prophets and squeezing every drop of meaning out of them was more than acceptable; that was the purpose and skill of the Rabbis.

So there are the principle reasons against believing in the reality of the virgin birth. First, in view of the importance attached to it there is so little said about it in Scripture. Secondly, on a purely scientific level it is a mighty big fact to swallow – that a woman can become pregnant without having intercourse with a man. It had never happened before and it hasn’t happened since.

But then, of course, the Christian claim is that there has never been anyone like *Jesus* before or since. If he really is the Son of God – and that is the claim – then not only may we expect that there will be something unusual about his conception and birth, something very much like the virgin birth is absolutely essential. It all hangs on this fact – is Jesus the Son of God or is he not?

Assume for a moment that the story of the virgin birth is not really true but was made up by the early church to add mystery and wonder to the person of Jesus. How then, was he conceived? The only acceptable alternative is that Mary had had relations with a man – probably Joseph but, if not, some other man. If it was indeed Joseph it makes it easier to believe for us, but it totally destroys the explanation in Matthew about Joseph being minded to divorce Mary but reversing that decision because of a dream. It destroys it because Joseph would have known very well that he was the father. However, if we are rejecting Luke’s story about the angel coming to Mary then we may as well reject Matthew’s about the angelic dream. The problem is that we are then left with a totally human Jesus. He was simply another human being, nothing more and nothing less – except that he was conceived out of wedlock.

In that case, Jesus is not God coming to visit us at all. He is simply another prophet; that is, he is a man whom God has called to serve him whom he filled with his Holy Spirit, just like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or John the Baptist. And that, of course, is basically what Muslims believe. The Christian belief that Jesus is both God and man is utterly false. He didn’t exist before he was conceived anymore than you or I. He wasn’t involved in creation as John claims in the opening words of his Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. [John 1:1/3]

That is all a load of rubbish. So see what has happened; we have not only discounted the truth of Matthew and Luke, we have also disposed of the claim of John’s gospel.

There is more. Do you remember the story of Jesus meeting the demonised man we know as Legion? Listen to what Mark records about that.

He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" [Mark 5:7]

Now it wasn't the man who was speaking this, it was the evil spirit within him, Mark makes that clear because he adds the explanation

For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" [Mark 5:8]

So here we have some being in the realm of the spirit claiming to recognise Jesus as being Son of the Most High God. If Jesus is nothing more than another human being, conceived through normal sexual intercourse, then he isn't Son of the most High God at all. So we have now disposed of the truth of Mark's gospel also.

Do you understand why I said that the crucial truth in this whole doctrine of the virgin birth is whether or not Jesus is the Son of God? If he is not then we don't have a problem; there is no need of the doctrine of the virgin birth – he is just another man conceived in the same way as every other man; albeit that he is then set apart in a special way like Isaiah or Elijah; but still just a man. This isn't God made flesh at all.

So if you have difficulty in believing that Mary could conceive a child without having experienced sexual intercourse, let me suggest that you should not concentrate on that but rather on whether you believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God, is he God made flesh? If you believe he is then it seems to me that *that* fact is so astonishing, so overwhelming, that it completely overshadows any difficulty in believing the truth of the virgin birth. In fact, the virgin birth, or something very like it, is

essential in validating the claim that Jesus truly is the Son of God.

So here we are, a week before Christmas. What is it we will be celebrating then? Is it simply that some 2000 years ago one more child was born into this world who was to grow up into a good, kind and compassionate man? Or is this God come in the person of his Son to give us the greatest revelation we have ever had of who he, God, is?

I don't find the doctrine of the virgin birth easy to believe and I am only too well aware of the difficulty it creates in seeking to commend that belief to others. But I have come to believe it, no longer because I was taught it when I was young as a fact to be learned like my arithmetical tables, but because I have come to know Jesus for myself and, knowing him, I believe he is indeed the Son of God. In the light of *that*, I find the virgin birth is both reasonable and logical.