

The Conception of God

A sermon on Luke 1:26-38 & 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 December 2020

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Message

God's coming does not reinforce our social norms and hierarchies, but breaches them to reconcile and re-dignify those who the social order has sacrificed and cast aside.

Sermon

Many preachers avoid tonight's gospel story, and I have to admit that I haven't preached on it too often myself. Twice ever I think. It's just one word that scares us off. The word "virgin" seems to cause people to polarise into two camps, rather like they do over the creation stories. One camp makes a belief in a miraculous conception in Mary's virgin womb a fundamental test of faith – you either believe it as historical fact or you are destined for hell – and the other camp flee to the opposite extreme and regard it as an embarrassing anachronism from an age that knew no better and which we enlightened moderns can consign to the dustbin of superstition.

Both positions end up being equally vacuous because the only question they ever concern themselves with is proving or disproving where one particular sperm came from. And the debate rages despite the fact that two out of the four gospel writers didn't think the details of Jesus' conception, or even his birth, were important enough to mention at all.

We need to ask better questions of this story than that. But for the record, so I can't be accused of having avoided the question entirely, here's my brief personal answer to the largely irrelevant question. When we sing the creed shortly, saying that we believe that Jesus was "born of the virgin Mary," I will do so without blushing or crossing my fingers behind my back. I believe it as a theological truth.

Whether it is also a historical and scientific fact, I don't know and don't really care. I am quite willing to accept the possibility that the conception was a miraculous act of God, but if it was somehow proved that it wasn't, it would not make an iota of difference to my belief that Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, and the Lord and Saviour of all. Why I think it makes no difference will hopefully become apparent as I now seek to unpack some of the much more interesting and life-changing truths that the story is really seeking to bring to our attention.

One of the reasons some people want to argue that a historically true virginal conception is a fundamental belief is that they say that it proves the divinity of Jesus. Now it is easy to follow their line of reasoning here, but if we look at how the early Church preached the birth stories, the point at issue was not proving Jesus's divinity, but proving his humanity.

It was a bit like the attitude the people in Aldous Huxley's book, *Brave New World*. In his vision of the future, all babies are conceived in test tubes and gestated in laboratories and decanted rather than born, and the people regard the whole concept of natural birth as gross and nauseating and unworthy of any civilised human. People used to feel a bit like that about the idea of God being born as a human baby. Conception and birth were seen as scandalously carnal things, okay for humans but unworthy of any God. Spirit was good and flesh was evil and so if Jesus was God he could not also be involved in such messy things as sex and birth.

So the idea that God was the biological father of Jesus was not the controversial proposal. It was the idea that Mary, or any woman, was his mother that was scandalous back then. So what is being affirmed to us is that Jesus is one of us, that he is not some other-worldly spiritual being floating untouched above the struggles we have to deal with. God has come among us, as fully human as the rest of us.

Now there are some who argue that the concept of Mary's virginity actually reinforces that old prejudice against fleshly things, and I can't dispute the danger of that. The Church's sad history of sexual repression has indeed led to interpretations of this story that argue that Mary was somehow only pure enough to bear the son of God because she had been untouched by anything as sordid as sex.

But the fact that a story has been misused and distorted does not mean that we have to give up on it. The early Church continued to speak of Mary as "Virgin" even after she married Joseph and gave birth to some naturally conceived brothers and sisters for Jesus, so clearly the word was regarded as conveying something more significant and permanent than just her lack of sexual history.

There are others who want to chuck out this story because they see it as nothing more than a variant of a long pagan tradition of mythological stories of heroes who were the offspring of a union between a god and a human woman. They suggest that because there are clear parallels and similarities, we can dismiss this story as simply made up to conform to a literary genre and therefore an irrelevant bit of superstitious nonsense.

Now these people are half right. This story does have parallels to many of the stories of greco-roman mythology, and since Luke was writing for a predominantly gentile readership, the parallels are probably deliberate. But what is often overlooked is that when biblical stories are paralleled to other religious stories, the most important things are not the similarities, but the differences. If you take a familiar pattern and alter it, it is the alterations that call attention to themselves, not the similarities. It is how the biblical authors tweak the familiar pattern that is the way in to what they are wanting us to hear.

So what is Luke changing here? In the usual pattern of the pagan stories, one of the gods takes a human woman by force. The impregnation is almost always a rape. The gods are powerful figures whose will is imposed by violence and cannot be resisted.

But in the story that Luke tells, the crucial focus of the story is Mary's consent: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Not only are we being told that God the Son is a fragile human who suffers as we suffer, but we are being told that God the Father is not a violent deity who forces himself on the world and its peoples against their will.

Rather this is a God who seeks our consent and our cooperation in the task of bringing new life and love and hope to birth in a dangerous world. This is not a God who validates those rulers who grant to themselves the right to decide what is best for others, whether it be democracy or industrialisation or free market economics, and impose it on them by force.

A third, and perhaps most important reason why it is significant that Mary is identified as a virgin is the scandalous company that it puts both her and Jesus in. You see, if Mary had already been married to Joseph, that would have provided no obstacle to a miraculous conception, but it would have made a huge difference to the way Mary and Joseph and Jesus were regarded by the community around them.

It is easy for us to overlook this, because we live in a society where most couples live together before they are married and a large percentage of children are conceived by unmarried couples, and hardly anyone bats an eyelid. We no longer call those children bastards, because we see no need to differentiate them from other children.

But in the society that Mary and Joseph lived in, Mary's consenting to being made pregnant before her marriage meant that she would be reviled by her neighbours as a whore, and that she risked almost certain rejection by her fiancé and possible stoning to death by the village. For Joseph, his decision not to turn his back on Mary but to accept responsibility for the child came at the cost of his own reputation as a man of honour and respectability and self-control.

And for Jesus himself, it was perhaps worst of all. In his world, the word for the child of an unmarried mother, was not bastard but mamzer, and the mamzerim were a despised caste, below slaves and above only Samaritans! The mamzerim were not permitted to marry and pass on their corrupt seed.

It is not all that long ago that we've heard stories of church schools refusing to enrol the child of a same-sex couple. But even that doesn't really compare, because nowadays it is the school's decision, not the parents and child, who draw most of the public scorn. You have to imagine your way back into a world where we would have all responded to such a school's action by saying "well, of course," to begin to grasp what it meant for Jesus to be born to an unmarried mother.

This is enormously important. Mary's status as a "virgin mother" and Jesus's status as a mamzer put them on the despised fringes of society. One of the main mechanisms by which societies maintain social order and unity is by scaring people into conformity with the fear of being identified and victimised as a despised misfit. We pick on them to help maintain our social cohesion. The fear of becoming the next one rejected keeps people on the straight and narrow of our social norms.

But when God becomes incarnate as a human being, who does God appear among? The mamzerim, the despised bastards of the world's imposed social order.

What a contrast to the presumption of King David that we heard about in our earlier reading. David, like everyone else, presumed that when it was time for God to make a home among the people, that God would turn to the King to arrange the details. Surely it would be the great king who would build the house that would be the dwelling place of God among the people.

But no. God enters into our world through a disreputable pregnancy and as a member of a despised caste. The one who would offer himself as a sacrifice to the world's violent desire to always sacrifice one rather than risk the whole nation comes into the world already identified as one who must be rejected if the "moral" health of the status quo is to be maintained.

And in radical contrast to the presumptuousness of the powerful King David who thought he could take it upon himself to decide where God would dwell, we see the simple humility of Mary's consent to be the one who would bear God into the world. We have focussed on the significance of the word "virgin" in our consideration of her tonight, and that has been the label most often used of her in the western churches.

But in the eastern churches, the most frequent designation is "Theotokos" which means "God bearer". Her unmarried, virgin status tells us a great deal about how God sides with the rejected and comes to overturn the structures by which we keep producing more and more rejects and "illegals", but it is in her status as Theotokos – God-bearer – that we are called to follow her as the model disciple and to give our consent to cooperating with God's purposes and bearing Christ into the world wherever we are sent. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."