

Concerning the Virgin Birth

The 4th Sunday of Advent: 21 December 2008

Luke 1:26-38

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The angel said to Mary, *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 holy; he will be called Son of God.* It is a fantastic story and – especially in our day – some Christians question it; some refute it, deny it, relegate the story to the scrap heap of sexual repression, or misogyny, or pre-scientific gullibility. Some don't bother explaining it away; ignoring the Virgin Birth takes a lot less energy.

For me - and while speaking today of my own beliefs, I think I am in the company of the Church's 2000 year tradition and teaching – the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is quite essential to Christianity. I think it important – as a Christian and a priest of the Church – to take seriously and teach the Christian faith as it has been handed down from earliest times.

The real issues concerning the Virgin Birth of Jesus are not about the possibility of such a thing happening. Unless one is a Deist – that is, unless one believes that God created the universe with certain inflexible laws of cause and effect which even God dares not transgress (the so-called “clock-work universe” which most physicists rejected long ago) – unless one is a Deist, one must admit such a thing is possible for the God who is boundless.

The issues of the Virgin Birth of Jesus are always those of “why?” Is the Virgin Birth consistent with what we know of God? Does this doctrine “fit” with the other pieces of God's action in Jesus? By ignoring or denying Jesus' Virgin Birth do we lose something essential from our understanding of God's intention for us?

For me, the reality of Jesus' Virgin Birth ‘fits’ in every way. First, and I realize I stand opposite contemporary writers like Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, I believe God does reveal God's own nature, Being and especially God's eternal desire for and means of our salvation *within* creation in direct, extraordinary ways. God usually reveals such things through human beings whom God calls, equips and empowers for such ministry. The Old Testament is chock full of such stories: God calls some, not others; often those chosen are the least likely candidates; Scriptures indicates that however unlikely others might think God's chosen, often with good reason, God equips and empowers them far beyond any “natural attributes”. On a larger scale, the call of the Jews as God's chosen people seems a bizarre choice. God had any number of mega-power kingdoms to choose from yet God called a numerically insignificant people and told them to roost on a strip of land between desert and ocean which is crucial for trade and military strategy, and which has been fairly continuously fought over since the first nomads stumbled onto the Jordan River. In short, the Deist god is not represented in the Old Testament. In the Bible God intervenes in extraordinary, unpredictable ways to call whom God chooses for miraculous ministries. From this perspective, there is nothing out of the ordinary about God choosing a chaste young woman to be the means through which the Second Person of the Trinity is incarnate.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus is completely consistent with all that is revealed to us of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels. All the Gospels agree that Jesus was no ordinary human being; a human being in every way, yet somehow more than a human being. While the first 18 verses of John's Gospel most poetically express Jesus' divine origin and nature, all the Gospels agree – each expressing it differently – that Jesus shares the divine life of God. Matthew and Luke express Jesus' divine “origin” through the use of stories about his

conception and birth, whereas John writes a theological tour de force. What about Mark's Gospel? That is a vexing question: yet I think it wrong to argue that since Mark's Gospel, the shortest, only takes up Jesus' adult life therefore we can ignore the other Gospels on the subject of Jesus' virginal conception and birth.

The story of the angel's visit to Mary, the strange announcement, the virginal conception of Jesus through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and his birth from the Virgin is meant to take our minds back to the stories of creation in Genesis. Humans were formed from earth's clay through the agency of God's Word and God breathed Spirit into us giving us life; in the same way, Jesus is conceived in conjunction with God's Word brought to the Virgin and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Yet this is not a "new creation" in the sense that God formed a different creature. The Virgin's body is now, as it were, the earth's clay; and what is brought forth is a "as-God-intended-from-the-beginning" creation. As God is the sole actor and agent in creation's beginning, using that which God already created to bring forth human beings through the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, so with the Virgin God is the sole actor using the body of the Virgin as the "clay" through whom the new Man is formed and born through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is no more extraordinary to believe in Jesus' Virgin Birth than to believe God created creation in the first place.

What is perhaps most crucial to a right understanding of the Virgin Birth of Jesus is that in this miracle God alone acts to save the world. In John's Gospel we read: *to all who received him, who believed in his Name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:12-14) In his Gospel and Epistles John teaches that being a follower of Jesus means we are given a share in His own divine life; we not only become like him in an imitative way, through faith in Him we are grafted into Him completely. We are given his own divine life, as a "new creation" to borrow Paul's phrase: as Jesus is brought forth into humanity solely by the action of God – and not as an accident of genetics, or by virtue of Joseph's and Mary's sexual desires – so we miraculously share Jesus' "origin", which is deep in the life of God's own divine Being and God's infinite love of all that God creates.

In my mind, if one discounts or denies the Virgin Birth, we lose something important and crucial to our faith. From at least the 2nd Century, Christian theologians have taught that the Virgin Birth – just as much as Jesus' ministry, miracles, passion, Cross and Resurrection - is also a sign and a means of God's all-sufficient redeeming action begun at creation, and now brought to fulfillment in the divine only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. As we testify in the Nicene Creed Sunday by Sunday, this is all *...for us and for our salvation....* The Virgin Birth is part of the beautiful tapestry of our salvation in Jesus Christ which is God's most longing desire. To take the beautiful miracle done through Mary out of the pattern lessens the whole. It is as if a first year art student would take on the task of "improving" some priceless work of a Master by cutting off six inches on the left side.

It is a fantastic story; some may question, refute, deny; relegate the story to the scrap heap of sexual repression, or misogyny, or pre-scientific gullibility. Some simply ignore the story. Yet to do any of these things is to lose something precious. What is lost is a testimony to God's infinite, single-minded love, because: *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made Man.* Amen.