

**Advent 3**  
**16/12/2007**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 7:10 - 16**  
**Psalm 80**  
**Romans 1:1 - 7**  
**Matthew 1:18 - 25**

### **A Jew, on his mother's side**

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In 1981 the American Economist Milton Friedman visited Australia and addressed a meeting of the economic and social policy committees of the Labor Caucus. According to Barry Jones, Friedman's urging of reduced taxes and flexible wages as an incentive to job creation caused 'palpable distress' among some Labor MPs. An anguished Senator Jean Meltzer said: "For the love of Christ, what about the poor?" Friedman replied: "I am afraid that your appeal to Christ is lost on me – I'm Jewish." Apparently Barry Jones interjected: "So was Christ - at least on his mother's side!" (*A Thinking Reed* p 252)

In his letter to the mostly Gentile congregation in Rome Paul makes two statements about Jesus Christ: according to the flesh was he was born of the family of David, a human like all of us, and according to the Spirit he was Son of God, whose place and power God acknowledged at the Resurrection. The second statement does not cancel out the first; the two are complementary and belong together. Jesus Christ was truly human, and he was the truly divine Son of God, in whom God's power had become manifest in the world.

These two statements are a neat summary of the issues connected with the Incarnation, and are further underlined by the graphic on the order of service. While he sits on his mother's side, Mary points us to Jesus who with his right hand gives a Blessing. The thumb and two fingers represent God in three persons, and the two fingers represent the divine and human natures that are united in Christ. This is sometimes called the Nicaean Blessing because it was that Council, which affirmed that in Jesus the two natures were united, with no separation between them. (That is why the Icon is referred to as Mary, the Mother of God.)

Ironically this is what most of the Carols celebrate, sung so lustily as they are by believers and non-believers alike at this time of year. But for many there is no more puzzling question than that of how Jesus was both human and divine, especially since the texts from Scripture and the Creeds, which affirm this, use the language of virginal conception, which to modern, scientifically trained minds renders it unbelievable. Matthew says: "*Now the birth of the Messiah took place in this way...*" but he does not provide the answers for the questions we ask of the text. What does he mean to say?

Most New Testament Scholars today would agree that the Gospels are not scientific narratives, but preaching written down to announce the Good News of God's presence with us in Christ. Their intent is missionary. They witness to God's mercy demonstrated in all that Christ did, and provide resources for those who want trust in

him and follow in his way. The Gospels probably arose in three stages, beginning from the end. By this time Mary may have been the only source for the infancy stories. The Apostles were witnesses only to the resurrection, from which the preaching of the Gospel began, and in the light of which the whole story of Jesus came to be understood. At first this was passed onto others orally. But as communities of faith formed the preaching was written down, and reflected the different emphasis of particular communities. The infancy stories therefore probably came later, obviously drew on the Old Testament Scriptures and were developed to support the proclamation of Jesus' identity and mission. Because this was their intent, scientific, sexual or gynaecological information is not presented, and from an historical point of view the virginal conception cannot be proved or disproved. Seeking an answer to this question is about as plausible as trying to calculate the date of Christ's second coming.

Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, and the birth of the Messiah occurs in context of a Genealogy that begins with Abraham, the father of the Faith. The Genealogy is not a list but a theological statement of how God initiated a covenant of blessing that would reach the whole world, and has continued to work for that purpose, through ordinary people and great. But the most unusual feature of the Genealogy is that it refers to four women, none of whom are the revered Matriarchs of Israel. Despite being in perilous situations and subject to some form of sexual irregularity, all four take initiatives in the work of God. Matthew's picture is of the Spirit of God being at work in real history, moving through the apparent obstacles of human scandal and brokenness to bring about the coming of the Messiah.

Like the other women in the genealogy who suffered under the patriarchal understanding of those days, Mary's situation was irregular. Although betrothed, her unexpected pregnancy places her in a dangerous situation with potential for disgrace, punishment and poverty or even stoning. Even Joseph, who seems to be a good man, was planning to live by the old prevailing logic and put his wife away.

What is the truth here? Was Joseph the father? Had an unknown person seduced, or worse assaulted Mary? Or was this a physical or biological miracle? As in the case of the resurrection, stories and abound and counter claims continue to be made. Yet the New Testament is astonishingly silent on the matter of the virginal conception, which suggests the subject was of no interest. The text Matthew quotes from Isaiah does not presume virginal conception. It says a young girl will become pregnant, and this will provide a time line for the action of God in connection with the people of Isaiah's day. There is in Matthew no trace of an anti-sexual bias as if the act was unclean. And there is no early Christian evidence to prove illegitimacy of conception. Matthew shows that it was Joseph's mistaken belief that Jesus was illegitimate. And even in a situation of a miracle of virginal conception the predicament for the woman would have still been dangerous. Mary is in jeopardy but right there the Spirit is at work in her life to fulfil the ancient promises. It opens Joseph's heart to an act of faith and generosity, and owns as holy what appears to be illegitimate. What we see as disgrace is transformed into grace.

Just as much of Jesus' ministry happened amongst those who were beyond the pale, in the incarnation the work of God goes "outside" the normal boundaries of acceptability, and of our modern understandings. God's ways are not our ways. And

the Holy Spirit is not male. This begetting is not a sexual act and the Spirit is never named as the “father” of Jesus. Rather the Spirit is the creative energy of God, and through this power, at work in the history of ordinary, out of the way people like Mary, this child’s existence is announced, and is not cursed. This child will be holy: claimed by God for a special relationship.

Just as Adam and Eve were created without human help, and the resurrection bursts forth where no hope of life could be expected, Jesus was born without Joseph’s help. The Holy Spirit was at work in a new act of creation. That Jesus was a Jew on his mother’s side is a sign that, in the endeavour to bring fullness of life to the world, God did not despise our human nature but embraced us fully, even in circumstances of uncertainty and risk.

We will continue to be interested in this story from the point of view of sex and gynaecology. But the church had no interest in these topics when it proclaimed Mary as the Mother of God and Jesus as fully human and fully divine. It was declaring that with this birth the age to come of Jewish expectation began to dawn. This was the deepest thing that could happen, and it occurred by the Spirit’s power, with the help of Mary, and the trusting obedience of Joseph. Jesus was a Jew on his mother’s side, and he was the fulfilment of the desire of the nations. When Paul said as much, and presented his credentials to the community at Rome he had one thing in mind. To awaken his hearers to the possibilities for life that had come into the world through Christ. Possibilities which are with us still.