

Advent 3
14/12/2008

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 17

Psalm 89

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Nothing is impossible to God: born of the virgin Mary

For modern readers the problems related to the Virgin Birth of Jesus seem to be especially vexatious, but it is a mistake to think that the only point Luke and Matthew were intending to make was concerned with physical virginity. We expect these texts to answer physiological and biological questions, but on the basis of their evidence our questions remain unanswerable to all but faith. The challenge is to understand these texts in their own right and hear what their message is meant to be. It is possible that if we wrestle with these texts deeply enough, we may arrive at a point where we see that intuitively the ancient authors do answer our questions, but not necessarily in the way we expect.

The fifth century Bishop, Leo the Great wrote: *“It is not enough to say that our Lord, Son of the Virgin Mary, is [truly human]; we must also believe that he is, as the Gospels tell us, a man of very specific human lineage.”* (Letter 31, 2-3) There are two things being said here. Firstly Leo touched on the key point the idea of the Virginal Conception of Jesus was intended to answer: it was a doctrine developed to secure the idea that Jesus was real flesh and blood, not some sort of spirit person or phantom who only seemed human. Luke emphasises Mary’s humanity, and her receptiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in what he sees as an act of new creation. Mary was an undistinguished young woman, a poor person from a small town who was engaged to be married she had no special virtue and no reason is given as to why she was singled out for the disturbing and unexpected news: she would be the mother of the unique Son of the Most High God. Only Abraham is thought of as open and obedient to the grace of God. Luke does think of Mary as virginal, but his story would not have struck people in the Greek speaking environment of his time as unusual: the birth of a great person was expected to be associated with miraculous events. But the point of Luke’s work is to proclaim that Mary’s hospitality towards the Holy Spirit resulted in a birth in which there was a complete unity between humanity and divinity. In Mary’s world it was the role of the Father of a child to give its name. That the Angel gives Mary the name Jesus is a sign that what is happening is an action of the most High God.

As time went by the Church gave more emphasis to the unity between Jesus' humanity and his divinity. The underlying idea is that what God has not fully embraced cannot be truly redeemed. This is what Leo the Great is getting at when he goes on to say: "*the Creator of time had to be born within time; he through whom all things have their being had to be begotten amid all these things.*" The point is that when Mary is pregnant with Jesus, she is "full of grace". She is the God Bearer or "the mother of God" as the church later declared. In her, that is from within the flesh of the old creation, new creation was being embodied and given flesh in the world. Luke's aim is to disclose to us that God does not despise anything about humanity, in fact God embraces it from birth to the death. It is out of us, and from amongst us that God does the work of salvation. Mary is the sign that it is through what is fully human and obedient to God that we have been given a fresh start in life.

The second thing Leo the Great said was: "*we must also believe that [Jesus] is, as the Gospels tell us a man of very specific human lineage.*" Luke and Matthew are emphatic: Joseph was of the house of David, and the reading from Samuel gives us a particular angle on what that means. The key point revolves around the discussion between David and the Prophet Nathan about building a Temple, a permanent place for the presence of God in Israel. David and Nathan want to do this, but God objects. The contrast between the Temple and the Tent in which God has dwelt is that the Temple may limit God's freedom to come and go as in the past. The theological idea is that God must remain free to be God. God will not be held in place by any arrangement made by humans, or made patron of the royal apparatus.

In the following dialogue God turns the subject on its head. Instead of David making a house in which God will dwell, God says that David, who has achieved pre-eminence and power through the relentless gift of grace, will be made "a house". Verse 11 says: "*the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house,*" and in verse 16 this house will last "*forever*". There is a play on words here "house" can mean dwelling and it can mean dynasty. The issue one of solidarity: in 2 Samuel, God promises unconditional, eternal fidelity to the lineage of David, an idea that Walter Bruggemann judges to be the most crucial theological statement of Old Testament faith (*First and Second Samuel* p 259). This idea is the deep taproot that forms the basis for all Messianic thinking in the New Testament. We read it through the lens of all we know about Jesus Christ, son of David, son of God.

That Mary was betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David, gives legitimacy to Jesus as the son of the eternal house of David. That she was with child of the Holy Spirit and the Angel gives the name Jesus legitimates her child as the Son of God. In terms of the Samuel reading, in her person Mary symbolizes the city of Zion, which according to the prophets, would have "the Lord" within it, and be the "*mother of all nations*" (Psalm 87:6).

Everything said here arises from the idea that God is free to be God in whatever way God chooses, something that is made most clear in the Resurrection. From that end point the Evangelists wrote to interpret the beginning of the story. Mary is in this because in freedom God chose her. By the gift of grace she became a tabernacle for the presence of God in the world, a type for the church, the womb in which Christians are conceived and brought forth into faith. The Resurrection proclaims that Jesus shares the power of God to the full and after him all who are “in Christ” are declared to be “children of God”. That makes Mary the mother of the new People of God, which includes all nations of the world.

We are inclined to think that, according to modern ideas of truth, virginal conception, and resurrection are both impossible, so therefore Christianity is not credible. But what the Scriptures aim to do is offer us a view of the world that places our life in a bigger context. To live by faith does not mean being credulous. But it does involve making a choice about whether or not we are self-created, or whether life is a gift to us. In faith we say it comes to us from the One who is the source of all, who is free, and does not conform to normal expectations. This One chooses to show us that the clue to life emerges from amongst the least, and continues in peace and self-giving until the cross. That is why Christmas and Easter are the great feasts of the Church. They are signs to us that God is to be found amongst us, demonstrating that true sovereignty rules according to forgiveness, which means reconciling love. That is what is on offer here in the witness to the Virgin Birth. The hardest thing in the world today is to help people understand what incredibly good news this is, for us and for all people.
