

Advent 4 20th December 2020
Luke 1:26-38
Contemplatio: Michael Wood

The fourth Sunday in Advent always draws our attention to the annunciation to Mary. The story about the conception of Jesus in a virgin has particularly challenged the Western scientific mind. Readers tend to autopilot into literalism and thereby fail to see the real meaning of the story through the eyes and ears of a first century Jewish listener. Jesus in Mary is far more about theology than it is about biology.

For a start, the ancient world did not know as much about biology as we do. We now know that a new life is formed by the union of a sperm and an egg. In those days they believed that the man deposited a tiny little human being into the woman's womb, who then incubated this like a "bun in the oven". The women contributed nothing to the biological construction of the fetus.

When the story says that Jesus is conceived by the *Holy Spirit*, rather than by a human father, the story is making a theological point that this baby IS God's DNA if you like. It might help us to remember that the story is written AFTER Jesus life, death and resurrection. People knew that they had encountered God himself, directly and fully, in the person of Jesus. When they get talking to Mary, it seems that some early aspects of this story come out. It turns out, quite understandably, that Mary has been keeping some things very much to herself.

This story is just one of the factors which led, 300 years later, to the doctrine of the dual natures of Christ – fully God and fully Human...indivisible and completely one and yet also distinct. Jesus, fully human and fully divine.

It's still a challenging story for us to hear, even on this basis. It sounds rather esoteric. It's a confusing story for us, just as it would have been for a first century listener. Despite their limited knowledge of biology, the first century reader still new that babies were produced by the sexual union of man and woman. So the fact that Mary says she's a virgin is sure to get people's attention. And they, like Mary, would be saying, 'how can this be? How is this possible? So the story, at the level of biology could completely do our heads in.

But rather than abandon the story, we could read it from a different place. We could also read the story from the position of what is called 'the poetic imagination'.

If we read the story as poetry and theology, then at least two of the points that the authors are making are these:

- (i) Jesus' life is a direct expression of the life and character of God. Even more explosively, it says that the very *nature of God* is human as well as divine, as it was in the beginning, is now and every shall be world without end. The story of the incarnation is NOT that there was a time when God was NOT human and suddenly decided one day to drop into planet earth via

Mary's womb and become a human being....it's not like God was teleporting in like in Star Trek. The theological point is that God always was human – in fact, God is the PATTERN or TEMPLATE for our humanity. We are made in the image of Christ – the human/divine one. As it says in the creed, 'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ born of the virgin Mary'. The Lord always was Jesus Christ. There was never a time when God was not Jesus.

- (ii) This outpouring of God can only happen with the cooperation and willingness of a human being - Mary.

One of the primary, if not only, ways that God can become present into the world is through the human being.

John's Gospel makes this even more explicit. In John's Gospel the invitation to us is to allow *ourselves* to be born of the Spirit, meaning to BECOME a fully realized human being, like Jesus was fully the human one. All distance between us and God has been closed through the life of God's Spirit in us. Jesus says to Nicodemus, *"what is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'"* (John 2:6-7).

What is true of Jesus coming to birth in Mary is a kind of foretaste, or pattern, or archetype of the life of the Spirit of God coming to birth in us. And we'll know what it looks like to be a human being by looking at Jesus.

That's the prayer that Jesus makes before his death, *"as you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....I in them and you in me"* (John 17:21,23)

This is what connects Mary's story to our story. Mary, at quite a young age was given the shocking opportunity to directly carry the fullness of the life of God in her and she chose to accept the mission even though she felt the least likely person about to do so (in her own words, just a lowly servant).

There's a movie I saw a few years ago called "Sea Biscuit"...the story of two least-likely characters...a poor young man and a horse who was too small. Together they formed an unbeatable horseracing partnership. "Sea Biscuit" was the American Phalaris. At one point in the film, the horse trainer asks the young jockey to ride the horse at full speed around the race-track in the pitch dark of night. The Jockey is scared witless and replies, "But I can't see the track", to which the trainer replies, "Don't worry – the horse can".

As I reread the story of the angel's announcement to Mary, I thought of how terrifying it can be to have God calling us into the darkness of unfamiliar territory....and that even though we sometimes can't see the track ahead, we hold on in the knowledge that *GOD* can see where God is taking us...God overshadowing us....God's life being born in us.

This is the invitation being put to us, I think, through this story. The womb-like part of us is like that hospitable part of Mary, who is able to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". It's not uncommon for women to have dreams of being pregnant and giving birth. When I hear these stories I always ask, 'what new thing to you sense God might be trying to bring to birth in your?'

What would it mean for my life to say YES to Jesus so deeply that I actually become a human being?

The Lord be with you.