

On the fourth Sunday in Advent we always listen to this mysterious story about the conception of Jesus, where the WORD of comes into physical being within the body of Mary.

For some people (and this was true of me as a young man), this kind of story can actually create a barrier to faith. The modern scientific mind tends to auto-pilot into literalism. We say, 'well of course we know this is just a fairy story. We know it can't be true because we know that a baby is created by a sperm from a male joining with an egg from a female, and that is how babies are made, so clearly this biblical story is just another example of fantasy and why the Bible is rubbish and irrelevant to the modern person.

If we do this (as I did as a thoughtful but angry young man) then it's a sign that we are in the grip of enlightenment rationality. We fail to acknowledge the sophistication of the Jewish story teller who masterfully teacher theology using simple story.

This story is the work of the theological imagination, which is what makes it so usefully true. The story is wrestling, from a post-resurrection perspective, with the mystery of who Jesus is and where he came from.

In their experience of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are absolutely clear that two apparently irreconcilable facts are coexisting in the same space and time.

- (i) Jesus is a flesh and blood human being
- (ii) In Jesus, they have encountered God – not just a 'prophet' speaking the word of God, but they have encountered God face to face.

As radical mono-theists, this was quite an emotional and intellectual journey to go on. This close encounter of the divine kind was a shocking, revolutionary and dangerous position to take. And so the story of the conception of Jesus tries to articulate this mystery in story form.

- (i) Jesus is born of flesh – born of the virgin Mary
- And
- (ii) Jesus is born of the DNA of God. What do I mean by the DNA of God? In the biological understanding of the day, people didn't know about sperms and eggs. What they thought happened was that the man deposited a tiny-wheeny little human person directly into the woman, who then acted as an incubator for nine months. The baby really was a 'bun in the oven'. While the biology is primitive, the theological point of the story is not. To say that Jesus was born by way of the overshadowing of the Spirit was to say that Jesus paternity on the father's side, was divine.

So, in a brilliant way, the first theological point of the story is something that was finally only hammered out 400 years later in the theology of the two natures of Christ. Jesus was both fully

human and fully divine – and the implications of THAT claim are enormous, revolutionary and dangerous. At the very least it means that we can't easily separate the transcendent and physical worlds because God uses physical stuff to reveal God's self.

The second main point of the story (and this is even more relevant to each of us) is that God can become fully present in the world only through participation and consent of a human being. God NEEDS Mary.

And what is true of Mary is also true of the Spirit's action in each of us, you and me. God needs hands and feet on this earth. Although we are imperfect images of God, we are still images which are being transformed and remade as we gaze upon God. St Paul puts it beautifully in his second letter to the church at Corinth, where he says:

“and all of use, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit”.

Mary is really an archytype or a pattern of what it means to gaze at God and say 'yes' – she is a model for us of the life of the Spirit of God coming to birth in us. The hymn writer, Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) picked up this theme when he wrote:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today*

“The tune I just used is called "St. Louis", which is the tune most often used for the carol in the USA. The writer of the tune recounts the story of his composition in 1924:

As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas Sunday-school service, and he asked me to write the tune to it. The simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, 'Redner, have you ground out that music yet to "O Little Town of Bethlehem"? I replied, 'No,' but that he should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous my brain was all confused about the tune. I thought more about my Sunday-school lesson than I did about the music. **But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony.** Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868”
[Wikipedia, accessed 20/12/17]

So maybe that is what it was like for Mary. Hearing the whisper of a tune in her ear called Jesus. What whispers have we heard in our lives? What is being whispered now? Are we listening?

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