

The same question surrounds the resurrection. Is it consistent with who he was and is? It is striking that there was something exceptional about his entry into our human history and about his departure from it.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you... For nothing is impossible with God” (vv. 35-37). The Jewish people believed that conception occurred through the activity of a man, a woman and the Holy Spirit. But this was to be the direct work of God, the direct activity of the Spirit – without a man. “For this reason the holy Child will be called the Son of God”.

Reflect:

- “There was something exceptional about his entry into our human history and about his departure from it”. The Bible doesn’t say a great deal about the Virgin Birth, but what it says is so clear and definite. Why is it so important that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary”?

Response

When we reflect on the implications of being mother of Jesus, we cannot take her response to the angel’s announcement lightly. There could be no simple, “That’s OK!” We sense in her reply a considered and definite commitment – “I am the Lord’s servant; may it happen to me as you have said.”

First-time parents are never prepared really. The sight of that new-born baby – so totally dependent and totally unique – can be overwhelming. But in the long term... what about their schooling, their job prospects, their friendships, their marriages, their parenthood... and about their commitments, their faith, their emotional health... about their future...?

Mary was only given a little glimpse – a picture of who her Son was to be, but not many clues beyond that. And, with that understanding, she committed herself. She was willing to be the Lord's servant.

Reflect:

- Mary was responding to the unique action of God – “I am the Lord’s servant; may it be to me as you have said”. No one else was asked to bear and mother the Christ. But all of us are asked to receive him, to welcome him, to believe in him, to listen to him, to follow him... How do we respond to him? What does this mean for our celebration of Christmas?

Study 2: My Soul Glorifies the Lord Bible reading: Luke 1.39-56

© Peter J Blackburn 2003.
Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*,
© International Bible Society, 1984.



Four Studies for Advent
by Peter J Blackburn

1. You will be with child

Reading: Luke 1.26-38

Christmas is coming! Already the stores are decorated. Already the carols ring out the message – it’s the season to be merry! share the Christmas joy with others! buy up big! Perhaps this Christmas the storekeeper has the fear that it may not be so, that the economic pinch will prevent people from spending as they usually do.

Christmas is coming! And some are asking the question, Why introduce Jesus into this secular feast? This is the feast of the reindeers and the sleigh, the feast of that over-weight gentleman dressed in red and white. Is that so? It is also, so we are told, the feast of family arguments, of domestic violence...

Christmas is coming! And if Christ is not in it, we may have been celebrating something, but not Christmas! The wonder of Christmas is the incarnation – that God the Son became a human being, that God came into our human history, not just as the Lord to whom we would all be responsible at the end of time, but as a participant. He came, not just to show us up or to show us how, but to live his life for us and to give his life for us. He came to be the Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Reflect:

- Down across the years, what has been essentially “Christmas” for us and our family?
- What is essentially “Christmas” for the average Australian? Is there really a sense of resentment that we want to introduce Jesus into what has become almost a secular feast?
- What are the elements that make Christmas distinctively Christian?

Visitation

Read: Luke 1.26-38.

The whole thing put Mary in a very difficult situation. She knew the strange matter of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth was well past child-bearing age. It seemed impossible for one who had for so long been childless. But the rumour was confirmed now. About a month ago Mary had

word from Elizabeth – she was five months pregnant. “The Lord has done this for me”, she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people” (1.25).

Then suddenly – “right out of the blue”, as we would say – an angel stood before Mary. Have you seen an angel? Mary hadn’t, either! She was a very matter-of-fact and practical young woman – not the “angel-seeing” kind! The encounter was real and, initially, quite disturbing. Hence the angel’s reassuring words, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you” (v. 28).

These days most churches “pass the peace” at some point in worship. “The Lord be with you” or “the peace of the Lord be with you” has become a familiar Christian greeting. Even those who are not strong on liturgy know to respond “And also with you” or “And with your spirit”. What do we mean by that? It is an assurance of the fact of God’s gracious and loving presence, which we extend to one another – even though we don’t always know the particular joys or trials which others are facing. It is a blessing – a prayer that the other person may know the presence and peace of God, no matter what their circumstances.

Reflect:

- How would we react if, in the middle of the passing of the peace, a person came up to us and, with that special emphasis of someone who is “in the know”, said, “Peace be with you! You are highly favoured!”? What would you say to that? “And also with you”? Or would you be like Mary – greatly troubled, wondering what these words meant?

Announcement

Then the reassuring words, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (vv. 30-33).

Reassuring? Remember – though engaged to Joseph, Mary wasn’t yet married. She was a virgin. She had never had a relationship with any man. And the expectation – and her commitment in betrothal to Joseph – was that she would still be a virgin at the time of their marriage.

Her cousin, Elizabeth, had been childless for many years and now was six months pregnant. That was wonderful – extraordinary – but Elizabeth was married to Zechariah. Elizabeth had felt a sense of “disgrace” for being childless – no child, no heir – God must be displeased with you. But what would Mary

face – pregnant and unmarried? Deuteronomy 22 spells out quite clearly the expectation in Israel that a woman would enter marriage as a virgin. “The interval between betrothal and marriage was commonly a year, during which the bride lived with her friends. But her property was vested in her future husband, and unfaithfulness on her part was punished, like adultery, with death” (Plummer).

Add to this all these statements about what the child is to be – not just Israel’s hopes for the Messiah, but this talk of a kingdom at a time when the Romans were in charge! Who wants to mother that child? And to say that he will be called “the Son of the Most High” – it’s really all too much to take! Better by far simply to become Mrs Joseph, wife of the carpenter in drowsy little Nazareth – in the backwoods of Galilee.

Reflect:

- Read again Luke 1.31-33. What clues are there as to the child’s identity and mission?

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary understands that this is to begin to happen right now. It is not, as some writers have suggested, a promise of a child to be born after her marriage to Joseph is consummated. Both this passage, which gives Mary’s account, and the end of Matthew 1, which gives Joseph’s, make it quite clear that Mary was a virgin at the time of conception. And while Jesus grew up under the legal protection of Joseph as father, there was this underlying uniqueness in his conception. So the genealogy in Matthew 1 ends with “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus...” (Mt. 1.16). And Luke’s genealogy in chapter 3 begins “He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph...” (Lk. 3.23).

It has been stated, quite correctly, that the record only leaves us with two options – Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary”, as the creed puts it, or he was the illegitimate son of a faithless woman – a suggestion which, in fact, some of the early opponents of Christianity alleged.

For Mary, as for us, virgin births just don’t happen. Conception requires both male and female. The real issue, of course, is whether it happened on this occasion. There is no suggestion that this is other than a unique occurrence. This is in harmony with the birth of the one who was truly “the Son of the Most High” – God the Son.