

## Advent IV 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16; Rom.1:1-7; Matt.1:18-25

### *Born of a Virgin*

*Isaiah 7:14: The Lord God himself will give you a sign: look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and you shall call him Immanuel.*

One of the good things about having bibles back in the pews is that if you look in the footnotes, you can see that interesting things have happened to some bible verses in translation. Including, rather importantly, Isaiah 7:14.

In the original Hebrew text we're told that the *alana* is with child – *alana* meaning 'young woman.'

A young woman being with child is of course not especially astonishing. And Isaiah didn't think it was. Rather, what he had been trying to say, in Hebrew, in the midst of a massive political and military crisis in 800 BC, when Israel thought it was about to be wiped out by two powerful neighbours was: 'look – God's in charge.' And I tell you, by the time the baby that young woman over there is carrying – you can almost imagine the prophet pointing the woman out – by the time he's five or six years old – those two kingdoms you fear so much will be gone, their kings who seem so mighty now will be dust. That was indeed a pretty remarkable thing to say – but the wonder involved was one of politics and power, not human reproduction.

And then comes the translation of the Bible into Greek, about 500 years after Isaiah spoke in Hebrew. And for reasons lost to us, they choose a different word. Not the *alana*, but the *parthenos* is now with child – the virgin. It's a fairly significant change, but interestingly nobody at the time seemed to set much store by it. We have no evidence at all, for instance, that if you'd asked many Jews of the time how the Messiah was going to come, they'd say 'oh well of course, he's got to be born of a virgin because Isaiah says so.' No. Most of them didn't even use the Greek Bible.

Why does any of this matter? Well, some people claim that the only reason St. Matthew and St. Luke say Jesus was born of a virgin, is because they thought he had to be. Isaiah said so. And indeed, that's just what Matthew says in today's Gospel reading – 'look! All this happened to fulfil what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet' before quoting Isaiah 7:14. So people think that the Virgin Birth is just an example of Christians writing history as it *should* have happened, now how it actually *did*.

Now, maybe the evangelists did sometimes do that sort of thing. They weren't strictly neutral historians, and never pretended to be. But in this particular instance, you see, there wasn't an expectation there for them to fulfil. People weren't reading Is. 7:14 and waiting for a pregnant virgin to show up with the Messiah. Luke doesn't even mention the prophecy. Perhaps he realised that Matthew's use of it was actually deeply unconvincing. Most Jews, hearing Matthew claim that the birth of Jesus fulfilled Isaiah 7:14, would say 'what are you talking about? That text isn't about the Messiah, and there's no virgin in it anyway.'

Indeed, the more likely scenario is something like this. Matthew, like Luke, thinks – for some reason – that Jesus actually *was* born of a virgin. He is especially concerned to show that Jesus fulfils prophecy, and so he goes hunting the scriptures for something, anything, which looks like it predicts this. And finally he comes across the dodgy Greek translation of Is.7:14 and turns triumphantly to his readers: 'Look, I found one!'. The prophecy didn't create the fact. Rather, it looks like Matthew – for some reason – believed in the fact, and then went hunting for the prophecy.

For some reason. *What* reason? The most obvious answer is: because Mary and Joseph said so. The Virgin Birth wasn't, remember, what had to happen. It wasn't what people were expecting when the Messiah showed up. So this new belief has to come from *somewhere* and the most obvious answer is, it came from the people most closely involved.

Well, that have might be reason enough for Matthew. But what about us? Can we modern people really believe that a child could be born without sex being involved?

First, just take a moment to appreciate how spectacularly condescending that question is to our ancestors. Ancient people knew where babies come from. They may not have understood all about gametes and zygotes, but they certainly knew that you don't get babies without sex. That is why Joseph's first instinct, when Mary told him she was pregnant, was to ditch her. He did not say, 'oh yes, virginal conception, that sounds plausible. That's just fine.' No, he thought she was lying. You don't get pregnant without having sex, end of. Only an angel telling him otherwise shook him out of that one. There is nothing uniquely difficult for modern people in believing the Virgin Birth. It has always been an eyebrow raising claim.

Some people of course think that it couldn't have happened because *miracles never happen*. They think the universe is run by rules of unbending iron, that there can never be anything truly new and surprising. That's too big a claim to even begin answering this morning – except to say that if a Christian made *that* their reason for doubting the Virgin Birth, they'd be in big trouble because you'd also have to deny so much else, not least the Resurrection. No, Christians probably have to agree that God *could* make there be a child without sex happening first. The more interesting question for us is *why would he?*

To which there are two bad answers and one good one.

The first bad answer is that sex is dirty. And if there is going to be a perfect human person sex cannot be involved, because it would make him imperfect from the word go. This is a bad answer because whilst Christianity admittedly has its fair share of hang-ups about sex, the Bible is pretty clear in its teaching that sex is fundamentally a good thing. True, it is easily abused. It needs 'use only according to the maker's instructions' stamped all over it, but it is never considered in itself a bad thing. And let's remember too that the God imagined by this answer as too squeamish to cope with sex apparently has no problem with going through childbirth and death – themselves pretty carnal, bloody and messy experiences. So, no. The miracle of the Virgin Birth is not intended as a criticism of ordinary sex. You might as well say, as C.S. Lewis did, that the feeding of the 5000 was an insult to the bakery trade.

The second bad reason to believe in the Virgin Birth is to say that Joseph can't have been Jesus' father, because God is. At first, this sounds plausible, but the problems soon become apparent. God's fathering is not the same sort of thing as Joseph's might have been. If you think it is, if you think the one necessarily rules out the other, you're really saying that God took the place of the human male, that God and the Virgin Mary have sex. Our enemies have often charged Christians with saying just that, but Christians have always wanted to say NO! When we say that Jesus is the Son of God, and that God is his Father, we are not making a claim that works on the same level as claims about sperm and eggs. Rather, we're saying that Jesus is the perfect expression of God, that He is the perfect translation of divinity into humanity, that when you see him you see God. And He could still have been all that *even if* He'd been conceived in the normal way. Maybe that's why St. Paul and St. John, who definitely believed that Jesus was the Son of God, show no interest whatsoever in how he was born. We don't know if they'd even *heard* of the Virgin Birth: they certainly don't seem to have thought it was of crucial importance.

Two bad answers then. What's the good one? Why would God do this – this unnecessary, unexpected, strange thing? What is the meaning in the miracle? Well, how about this. Jesus indeed did not *have* to be born of a Virgin. It's not a *requirement*. But my goodness, it makes *sense*. What after all, *is* Jesus? He is the New Start. He is the breathing in to a tired, battered old world, of unexpected, fresh, joy. If He is who Christians think He is, if He is the Conqueror of Death, the one in whom all the battles and bad news and tears of human history are touched and transformed, healed by grace? If He is the One who does what is quite beyond all our effort, who lifts our race up from its ruin, who forgives the unforgiveable, who heals the utterly broken, who goes into our grave and raises the dead ... if He is really all that, what better way to announce the fact than through a strange, mysterious, virgin Birth? It's as if – except it's not as if, it really *is* – God is saying to the world: 'Look: here is something you cannot do for yourself. Here is something beyond all effort, beyond all striving, beyond all your resources and power. Here is pure Gift, that you couldn't expect and couldn't produce – just Gift.'

That's what believing in the Virgin Birth is about. It's not about mistranslated Hebrew; it's not being anxious about sex. It's about Who has arrived, Who has been given. He is the One we could not make for ourselves, the One beyond all our effort, the One who is the Yes to all God's promises. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.