

'I believe in His miraculous conception and birth'

Introduction

In December each year we celebrate a special birthday that was not originally associated with Christmas trees or Christmas pudding or cards and other popular traditions of the last one hundred and fifty years in our country, but of the extraordinary significance of the birth of a baby in an animal shelter outside a small village in a far outpost of the Roman Empire. When Jesus was born approximately two thousand years ago, the Emperor Augustus had ordered the residents of his empire to be registered for a change of taxation, in effect so he could find a way to increase the taxes to pay for the growing costs of running his empire. In the provinces of Syria (that included Israel & the present day Palestinian territories) and Egypt, the local custom of the registration taking place in a husband's ancestral home village or town was followed, though it was local registration in the rest of the Empire. This is why the young couple Joseph and Mary had travelled so far from their home region of Galilee in the north of their country to go to Bethlehem, a small community just over six miles south of Jerusalem. This was not a high ranking couple or significant monarch and his wife having a first child, who might have been acknowledged as important in the society of their day. From a human perspective, they were very ordinary people from a poor area unknown outside their local community. In worldly terms they were 'nobodies' but in God's eyes they were very special, because they were seeking to honour Him by taking some big steps of faith into an unknown future. It is also highly likely that at the time, the majority of local residents in Bethlehem did not grasp the significance of Jesus' arrival into their midst. The idea that 2.5 billion people minimum would be celebrating His birth two millennia later would be beyond their comprehension!

What does this Early Christian statement of belief say about Jesus' entry into the world? **'who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'**

What does it mean? and what Bible passages can we turn to as we look for an explanation of what actually happened all those years ago.

The Bible is very clear that the entry into and the exit of Jesus from this world were by supernatural actions of God. His bodily resurrection from the dead and subsequent ascension to heaven were extraordinary events that prepared the way for the launch of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost, that was no more or less miraculous than the extraordinary events that led to Jesus' entry into our world in Bethlehem. This statement is carefully crafted to emphasize the deity and the humanity of Jesus; to declare that He is the Son of God, but also that He was fully a human being. He uniquely is the bridge that unites the Creator and His creation together. His incarnation or entry into this world was to be followed by something even more extraordinary in His primary purpose for coming into our world. The One who created this planet came to give His life in our place on the cross to reconcile guilty sinners with a holy God through His perfect sufficient sacrifice of Himself in our place. But to return to this subject, we need to turn to the Bible passages that guide us in our understanding of Jesus' miraculous conception and birth into our world.

1. The Old Testament background (Isaiah 7:14)

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel.

(a)**The context of this prophecy** In the 8th century BC in Israel the times had changed. The era of peace and prosperity under the great King Uzziah, when the nation had never had it so good had gone. The superpower of the region Assyria was looking ominously in their

direction and other would be powers were flexing their muscles, even the modest governments of Samaria and Damascus thought that pressure could be exerted on little Judea to the south. Ahaz was a king who wanted to play games of pretence that all was really okay when disaster for the nation appeared to be imminent. ‘Everyone’ was deeply worried for the future. Had God forgotten His people? Did the nation have a future? The glorious half century of the good old days that had only ended so recently seemed an age ago. What would happen to prophecies of the line of David continuing on the throne, for example the words of Nathan to David in II Samuel 7:11, 13. Speaking of Solomon Nathan said: *The Lord declares to you that the Lord Himself will establish a house for you; ...He is the one who will build a house for My name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.* In this context the Lord sent Isaiah, His servant, to speak to the king and to show him that there was a way forward, that there was a hope for the future; that God had not forgotten Ahaz and the plight of the nation. Do you feel like Ahaz that the Lord has ‘forgotten’ you or seems so far away in your difficult times? Are you like him struggling with huge challenges that appear to weigh too heavily on your shoulders?

(b) **The revelation through this prophecy** It is the revelation of God as *Immanuel*, **God with us** that means so much. It is in this desperate situation that the Word of the Lord speaks about the nearness of God in our trials. It was not the power of God or the wisdom of God, but the **presence** of God with His people that mattered in this situation. As believers, the Lord rarely takes away our trials, instead He assures us of His presence with us through them. There are a number of promises that assure us of this blessing in Isaiah. Isa.26:3-4: *You will keep in perfect peace the one whose mind is stayed on You, because he / she trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for in Yahweh the Lord is everlasting strength.* We serve a God who delights in doing the humanly impossible, if that is what it takes for the good of His people -the coming of Jesus, leaving heaven’s glory where He had been for eternity to be born as a baby; the virginal conception and extraordinary circumstances surrounding His birth were not in any conceivable human birth plan; Paul in his glorious letter to the Romans (8:25) declared: *But if we hope for what we do not have, we wait for it patiently.* Could Isaiah communicate something of his hope in the Lord to Ahaz? Would this king put his faith in Immanuel? Can you or me transmit something of our confidence in God to a needy and troubled world around us; a people who have an increasing number of questions and precious few satisfactory answers about the meaning and purpose of their lives. They do not want pious phrases from us; rather they are looking for a meaning and purpose to their existence rooted in the reality of our daily lives. Ahaz wanted an army now but God offered the sign of the birth of a special baby in the future. *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* Two thousand years ago many Jewish people in Israel might have said: ‘What I need is the removal of the Roman occupiers and you are telling me that God’s salvation for the world is revealed in a baby born in a cave in the hamlet of Bethlehem, visited first of all by the despised outcasts from the fields – the shepherds! What is the equivalent sign you and I want in our generation? The challenge is always this: will you and I have faith in Immanuel and the patience to wait until what He has promised is accomplished? Will you and I trust that the way God might work in our lives today might be very different to what we had expected or prayed for?

2. **The message from the Angel** (Matthew 1:18-25)

There are two particular New Testament passages that provide vital information to us; not only about what happened, but also how the leading people in this human story processed the information they received. For us today, we have a choice to believe or not believe what was reported to have happened, but for Joseph and Mary their lives were changed for ever by this

remarkable series of events. The Bible is open and honest about what happened and how the information was processed by this couple. Matthew's account is a focus on Joseph and how he reacted to the news he received from Mary or from another member of her family.

(a) **The dilemma Joseph faced** (Matthew 1:18-19) *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

I think it likely that Mary and Joseph had a frank and emotional conversation. But there is no easy way for Mary to explain it. She is pregnant and he is not the father. In today's society there are ways people can be assisted to have their children in the health care system, but not then. It was a deeply, socially conservative society. There were very few babies born outside of marriage. Couples married young with a spouse arranged by their parents and any time alone prior to the betrothal would have been under the supervision of an older family member. The betrothal (that included the legal paperwork for marriage) took place a year ahead of the wedding celebrations. A couple not going ahead with a marriage literally had to divorce to break off the arranged marriage. However, the reputation of both families would be damaged in the community by such a choice. The pressure he felt was intense.

He was completely shocked by the news and though he handled it remarkably well, he must have been heartbroken at the bombshell that had landed in his lap. He could not believe that what Mary told him was true. Stop for a moment and put yourself in Joseph's position. The decision was his to make. He could easily call off the wedding celebrations – Mary had told him that she a virgin had conceived a child without the aid of a human father, something that had never happened before and has not happened since. There is an issue of trust. He would not have been human not to have felt the pain of apparent betrayal by the woman he loved and with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his days. I am sure he would have asked the question – 'Why me?' – why could it not have been someone else? Have you asked that question at some time or other? Are you even asking that question this week or in recent weeks over circumstances that have overtaken your life? Maybe plans that seemed certain have come crashing down around you with little prospect of resurrection. Your hopes and dreams have shattered and you struggle to attempt to pick up even some of the pieces. In such times we need to ask: 'Lord what are You seeking to communicate to me through this situation?' Lord what can I learn from this problem I cannot evade? Or maybe you have been living for self without too much thought of God or the needs of other people close to you and it is a time to refocus your energies and direction in life. Obstacles can become opportunities. Has God been prompting you to commit your life to following Jesus, but you have been resisting His quiet voice in your conscience? There is no better day to heed His voice and accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour today.

(b) **The information he received** (Matthew 1:20-21) *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.'*

What do we learn about Joseph in this situation? He took his time to consider all the facts and as a devout Jew prayed to God for wisdom and guidance. There was no quick and impulsive decision-making. He is to be highly commended for that. He allowed time for God to speak into his situation. He was still minded to divorce Mary but to do so in the way that did least harm to her reputation and that of her family. His love for her shone through all his decision-making. We in the Western world have so much to learn from Joseph. So often individualistic decision-making about 'what is best for me' trumps consideration of the impact choices can make on other members of our families or on our friends. I thank God for the maturity of this young man in taking the time needed to process all that was going on. It is

also good that he remained open to God guiding and directing him even when he was fairly certain he knew the bigger picture of what was going on- when he didn't!

There was a big issue of trust at stake here. What is crucial is that he was in a right relationship with God and was open to sense God speaking to him. He had no doubt that he could trust God in this situation. Are you / am I able to sense God's leading and guidance to us? In this case God used a dream to attract his attention. What would God have to do to get your attention or mine? Joseph had to learn that what God was doing was most unclear to him. He had to trust the Lord that He had a plan and purpose for him as well as Mary in this situation –in fact for the two of them as a married couple. Mary your wife will produce a son who is the Messiah. The child conceived in her womb came about through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit. She has told you the truth, extraordinary though it might seem. Do you need to put your faith and trust in God for salvation for the first time today? Or as a Christian, is there an issue you are wrestling with but are struggling to accept what you reluctantly sense God may be wanting you to say or do? Following Jesus is not the easy option, sometimes it can be the hardest way. The path of self-denial in a relationship context where to go ahead would not be wise or for our long-term good; a choice of a job that may have higher pay but longer hours and far greater stress that may seriously impact your time for family or for church; what would Jesus want me to do is a good question to ask even if there is no simple answer. God would guide Mary and Joseph one step at a time. It is the same today for us as well.

(c) **The impact on his life** (Matthew 1:22-25) *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:*²³ *'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').*²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*²⁵ *But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus.* Notice the usefulness of the Scripture verse in Isaiah 7 here. God was bringing to pass what He had promised would happen. God's timescale can be very different to ours. This can be very hard to accept, but this amazing young man said, 'God, I don't pretend to understand all that is going on, but I trust my future into Your hands. Fast forward two thousand years to us today, the principle is still the same –forsaking all I trust Him. The issue before us is simply this: in my own strength I cannot do what God wants me to do; but in the strength of His Holy Spirit I can do anything He asks me to do (Philippians 4:13). The crucial verse here is verse 24: *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord **had commanded him** and took Mary home as his wife.* Is God speaking to you today –will you have the courage to respond to His call? Will you place your trust in God? Joseph did what God asked him to do although it was extraordinarily difficult for him to do so. Who knows what you may accomplish in obedience to His call –if only you are willing to do what the Lord has asked you to do for Him.

3. **The encounter with the Angel Gabriel** (Luke 1:26-38)

(a) **The encounter with the angel** (Luke 1:26-33) *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,*²⁷ *to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'*²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*³⁰ *But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.*³¹ *You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus.*³² *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,*³³ *and He will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; His kingdom will never end.'* God knows what He is doing. He knew the kind of person He had asked to undertake this important role and responsibility. What God asks you or me to do something, in exactly the same way, He knows you and me better than we know ourselves

and will equip and empower us to do it. The angelic greeting was amazing: *'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'* Immanuel! God is with you. You are not on your own. All that I ask you to do will be in my presence and through the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We never know what opportunities will come our way to share our faith or to live out our faith day by day. It might be in your workplace that you are invited to develop some skills or take a different position that you had never thought of doing or even felt capable of doing, but your manager or employer saw things differently. How many of us today can say that our educational path or our employment history is exactly what we had expected or planned for when we were teenagers? I would be fairly confident that it is very few of us. God has created each one of us with a remarkable range of abilities that can be used with hard work to accomplish far more than we can often imagine is possible. A number of us take big hits in life when it feels like the ground has given way under our feet, but even though we can have real struggles to go through, to know that God has plans for our future is so important.

For Mary, the words of the Angel Gabriel were truly remarkable. I don't get a sense that Mary had sat around at home waiting for an angelic visitation to explain her future life. On the contrary, I believe she was faithfully living out her faith in doing the best she could in carrying out the tasks assigned to her. Thank God for the ordinary days when 'nothing special' happens, but because of His common grace our basic needs are met. The advertising industry presents a false narrative of life as a gripping roller coaster ride of exhilaration with a few scary bits! We must keep our feet on the ground and be appreciative of our ordinary blessings in life. Now there are exceptional circumstances. For Mary, her commission from God to be the mother of the Messiah, God's Son, was truly extraordinary. What God asked her to do and what He wants you and I to do today is possible through the empowerment of His Holy Spirit.

(b) **The questions she needed to ask** (Luke 1:34) *'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'* God is happy to receive our genuine questions about what is going on. He knows there is so much we don't understand. From Job in the Old Testament thousands of years ago, to us today it is good to bring to God our questions. Are there questions you want to bring to the Lord today? Go ahead and bring them to Him in your prayers. After all, if we never want to ask questions it is possible that we haven't really grasped what is in front of us!

(c) **The explanation and response to God's call** (Luke 1:35-38) *The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'*³⁶ *Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.'*³⁷ *For no word from God will ever fail.'*³⁸ *'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'* Then the angel left her. The grace of God here is so beautiful. God gives the answer she seeks, but in reality it only raises other questions about what it means in practice. However, the information about her relative Elizabeth that she can check out is so helpful. The two women, together, can encourage one another in their walk with God. In both cases God's plans for their lives were unexpected, but their trust in Him was rewarded. The biblical account of the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus is a powerful reminder of the greatness and trustworthiness of our God in each and every generation.

Question for Reflection: Do you need to put your faith and trust in God for salvation for the first time today? Or as a Christian, is there an issue you are wrestling with but are struggling to accept what you reluctantly sense God may be wanting you to say or do?

Song for Reflection: 'The splendour of a King –How great is our God'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut5LBsi-YGE>