

When Theology And Gynaecology Meet
Advent 4, Year C
Luke 1: 39-44
20 December 2009

Inner city churches are often located next to major traffic routes; so quick-witted Vicars have an opportunity to get the message across in quirky, eye-catching ways. One of the better efforts had a picture of the stone tablets of the Law, the 10 Commandments, as they came down from Mt Sinai, with the caption reading – For quick, quick relief take two tablets.

Am I alone, however, in finding this week's effort outside St Matthews in the City, Auckland to be shallow, tasteless and offensive? It shows Mary and Joseph in bed together, apparently in the buff beneath the sheets, with Joseph looking decidedly down cast and dejected. The caption reads, "Poor Joseph. God was a hard act to follow."

In explanation Glynn Cardy, the Vicar, writes, "Progressive Christianity believes the Christmas stories are fictitious accounts designed to introduce the radical nature of the adult Jesus – Christian fundamentalism believes a supernatural male God who lived above sent his sperm into the womb of the virgin Mary."

Although this is about the least helpful way of bringing the doctrine of the virgin birth to national awareness, it does provide a useful way in to considering what this morning's gospel passage is all about, and I intend to tackle some of the difficulties that surround belief in the virgin birth.

What we just heard this morning is indeed a strange story to our ears. Elizabeth is a woman too old to conceive or have a child, but that is going to happen anyway because God will assist the normal processes of procreation and gestation of a baby. Mary is by our standards too young for pregnancy or child bearing, since she was probably aged somewhere between twelve and fifteen, in a society in which most women were married mothers by their mid or late teens. Remember that in the ancient world there are no such things as teenagers – you are a child, then you are an adult, in a society in which people marry young and die early.

What has just happened in Mary's womb is indeed outside our normal gynaecological expectations. Is it impossible for God to do what Luke just said he has done? No, because God made the world anyway, so he is capable of doing anything he wants to it, and within it. That is not saying that the world and human beings came straight from the hand of God – the long process of evolution did that – but it was a process that God launched and directed.

The problem with the kind of miraculous intervention that conceives Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary is that God is obliged to respect the scientific laws that he made that govern the natural operations of the world. They are wise laws, and he wouldn't want to be meddling with them, and changing them all the time, or the result would be chaos in our world. But on the other hand the Bible makes it clear that God does occasionally suspend these laws, or as Rowan Williams puts it, he allows nature to open up to its own depths in such a way as to permit extraordinary events to occur which move his purposes forward in the world. The Bible and Orthodox Christian faith believe in an interventionist God, who is interested in what goes on in our world, who is actively involved in our world, and who hasn't just left us to get on with it as best we can. Of course he has to respect human freedom, so he can't be overruling our decisions all the time, no matter how clottish they can sometimes be. So he tries to stay out of it as much as he can, and when he does act it tends to be with the kind of subtlety that draws a human response rather than driving it or compelling it. So for instance he turns up in a foreign occupied country in the person of an innocent, vulnerable baby.

If so called progressive Christians have a problem with an interventionist God, and if they believe that miracles never happen, then it seems to me that they are in fundamental disagreement with the Christian religion as it has always been understood both by the Christian community itself, and for that matter by its enemies. I would want to put it to them that they appear to believe in some other religion than Christianity. For the resurrection is an even more stupendous miracle than the incarnation, since as we all know dead bodies don't come to life again. And if the resurrection is another of these fictitious accounts, then we have indeed been pulling off a con job on the public all these years.

The other objection to the virgin birth is that it is held to be a denigration of human sexuality. It is supposed that those who put forward the idea of the virgin birth did so because they believed that God would bypass the normal start process for a human life because he finds it to be dirty, disgusting, degrading, and not something he would want his Son to be tainted with by association. It is true that there have been some varieties of Christianity in the past that have been suspicious of sexual pleasure, that have wanted to minimise sexual activity by Christians wherever possible, and that have rather overdone the ascetic world denying aspects of their faith. I am prepared to concede that this inheritance from our past has had unhelpful knock on consequences in the starting positions of some Christians in the current debates going on inside the Church about human sexuality. But I don't think that this is our problem now. We are rather at the other end of the spectrum in the Christian west. Many, many Christians in western societies have quietly gone along with the sexual revolution that has been such a powerful force in

western culture, and are no different in their sexual behaviour and assumptions from their secular neighbours.

I can't help noticing that some in the Episcopal Church who are very much in favour of Church sanctioned partnerships for lesbians, gays, bi-sexuals and the trans gendered often use the phrase "holy Love" to describe what goes on in such relationships. It is a startling phrase that appears to exalt human sexual activity to the point where it is divinised. One of the reasons why the prophets of Israel denounced the Canaanite cults that were so seductively popular with their countrymen is that often they built sexual activity in to the way worshippers united themselves with these false Gods.

Christianity has a more realistic view of human sexuality. It is there to promote positive bonding between parents in the long haul of caring for children. It is an avenue of communication and intimate linking between married people. It is not a recreational activity for thrill seekers and the bored. God has sensible rules around human sexual activity that protect us against our own unmaking, and self-inflicted unhappiness. The only kind of holy love that Christians know about in sexual relationships is the way in which married Christians change each other in a more Christ centred personality direction through the way they relate to each other in the business of ordinary living. Christianity therefore has a positive and realistic view of human sexuality. Joseph wasn't written out of the conception narrative because God doesn't like sex.

The point of the virgin birth is that it is God's way of making it clear that Jesus comes from outside the cycle of human generation. The x factor in this remarkable human being is partly because there is more to him than just human DNA can account for. He came from another place in every sense of the word – a phrase we sometimes use of someone who has had such a wonderful and heart-warming effect on others in a way that is hard to explain. There is another level of vital human existence here; an extra dimension of being in this child, and its source can't have just been from his mum and dad.

That is not to minimise the vital contribution that Mary and Joseph made to who he became as an adult. Eamon Duffy put it very well when he wrote that, "Mary was the intimate source of the human identity of God himself, giving to God all that a mother gives to her children – blood, bone, nerve, personality." And Joseph in his parenting would have modelled much of what Jesus grew up into. For Jesus did not come straight from the hand of God, pre fabricated as it were into a ready-made personality. He became whom we read about in the gospels through a long process of interactions with others that slowly matured him. As it says in Hebrews, "Son that he was, he learned obedience..."

The role of Son of God faithfully obedient to his loving heavenly Father is one that he grew in to through a series of moral decisions made afresh every day as he built his future brick by brick. As I say to our baptism families, you parents are the most powerful religious educators that your children will ever come in to contact with. You will shape their ideas and their feelings about God in decisive ways. You are the guardians of your children's religious identity. In so many ways that is what Mary and Joseph did for Jesus.