

Jesus Our Mutant Saviour
Christmas 2010
John 1: 1-5, 9-14

On one memorable afternoon in my childhood I returned home from primary school and was immediately taken aside by my mother for a talk about the facts of life. She certainly succeeded in communicating to me that this was an important part of adult life, but something got garbled in transmission and I came away with a misleading impression about what people got up to to make a baby.

A little later the primary school had a go at getting the facts across. A fathers and sons evening was held at the local picture theatre. A rather dull monochrome movie was shown, at the end of which the woman presenter brightly asked if anyone had any questions. A deep, sustained and embarrassed silence fell across the gathering.

Was I innocent, lacking in curiosity, or just gormless that the full biological reality of what was under discussion did not become apparent until summoned to the prefects study at Christ's College where a wall illustration made everything crystal clear. The advantages of a Church School education!

Apart from the enjoyable mechanics of human reproduction, the biological back-story of what goes on to start a human life is pretty interesting too. The mother supplies 23 chromosomes in the egg, and the father contributes 23 chromosomes in the semen. The chromosomes contain the DNA coding that is so influential in determining who we will be. Within these matched sets of 23 chromosomes from mum and dad, they each supply one sexing chromosome. The one from the father determines whether the child will be male or female.

Why all this biology matters at Christmastime is that two of the gospels, and the faith of the Church as defined in its creeds at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, insist that Jesus did not have a human father. He was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the action of the Holy Spirit at the initiative of God the Father. Which appears to mean, as my daughter pointed out to me, who is studying evolutionary biology at university, that Jesus is a mutant. That is to say he would have had 23 mortal maternal chromosomes, but no mortal paternal chromosomes, which raises some interesting questions about how he came to be who he came to be. And it is why I have called this sermon, "Jesus our mutant Saviour."

Scientific laws that God respects and works within undergird the world in which we live. After all he made these laws, and if he was always interfering with them and bypassing them our world would become a very random, unpredictable and scary place. But just

occasionally miracles do happen because God having made the world is free to do anything he likes. The incarnation, like the resurrection, is one of the most stupendous of these miracles. So exactly how did he pull this one off?

Maybe it is trying to peer behind the curtain and read God's hand too much in trying to spell that out, but as we try to think about how he might have gone about it, and why he chose to begin the life of Jesus in this way we can get a line on what Christmas is all about.

What the Holy Spirit had to supply to get Jesus under way was 23 divine paternal chromosomes, including a Y sex chromosome that would have made him a boy. Either he had to find a way to generate this genetic material within Mary's womb or to transmit it to her. Alternatively he would have had to supernaturally infuse another kind of start to life code at the moment of conception, which is as yet unknown to us.

Geneticists tell us that who we add up to in adult life is the result of a 10% contribution from our genes, 10% from our environment, and an 80% mixture of the both of them. No doubt the character, personality and behaviour of Jesus were shaped in decisive ways by the parenting he received from Mary and Joseph. It could be argued too, in terms of what we now know about the development of adolescent boys, that the peer group he knocked around with in his growing up years would have been an influence. And I think we can take as a given that what we now call his mission consciousness, his sense of what he was supposed to be about in his life vocation, would have been the result of an acute and devout mind reflecting on the Scriptures that would have been drummed in to him at Synagogue school.

Yet making full allowance for all the ways that his life experience enriched him and polished him I want to argue that the Holy Spirit provided an essential x factor at the moment of conception that would declare itself fully in his adult living and believing.

A feminist theologian once said that the Incarnation shows that Jesus comes from outside the cycle of human generation. At one level I suppose she was arguing that he is untainted by patriarchy in his origins, but more importantly she was saying that he is in himself, and provides something that, the human race could not have done for itself. For they're to be a breakthrough factor for the human race in its relationship with God someone had to cross the genetic barrier from the Godward side to be the pioneer of our salvation.

When people met Jesus they encountered an independence and originality of personal reality that was hard to account for. "Where did he get all this from," was a common reaction. At Christmas we are celebrating the fresh resources of Divine being that initiated him. We are acknowledging the contribution of the Holy Spirit in starting,

building and shaping the remarkable personality of He who is the Divine bridgehead into human affairs.

There are a number of outstanding characteristics of Jesus in his personal style that we might trace back to his extraordinary conception. I am going to highlight just one. He had a sense of close filial connection to the one he called *Abba – Father*, a deep instinctive trust in a new radical way in the God of Israel. This feeling and sensibility of unbroken, intimate connection with God remained with him right up to the cross.

When I think about where I hope to get to over a lifetime's habit of prayer it is to this sense of intimate abiding in the bosom of the Father, of resting in God's presence without effort or strain, and of repositioning all my anxieties, aspirations and longings within the perspective of trust in a God who can do anything. Given what fearful, defensive and closed off creatures human beings tend to be I can see why it took a mutant to call us out of the rut we had got ourselves in to. For sure some of his chromosomes must have been different if he was to break the mould of what human beings had become. And if we can't follow in his footsteps as a result of some personal genetic modification there are interior changes we can make to habits of heart and mind and behaviour as we open ourselves to that Holy Spirit who made such an outstanding contribution to the Christmas story. There is a certain plasticity to our nature that is God given. We can change and grow into a junior partner of that remarkable baby who came from somewhere else by extraordinary means.