

Good News from Doctor Luke 2 Handmaiden of the Lord

Luke 1:26-56

Having realistically set the scene of how far the people of God had fallen into unbelief and dull routine religious formalism. Doctor Luke shares *Good News*, gospel, with his hearers: he tells the story of Jesus and then seamlessly adds the story of the early church and the acts of the Holy Spirit. In his words of introduction (v1-4) he tells us that he has had a chance to stand back from the extraordinary events that had been going on, to talk to the people involved, to read some earlier writings (like Mark), and to make his own quite full version so that readers could know the truth about the things to know about Jesus. His books not only place Jesus at the heart of the Jewish world of the first century but at the heart of the Roman world into which the Christian gospel exploded and which it was destined to change so radically. In essence this is not a gospel for the Jews (Matthew), a gospel hot off the press from Peter (Mark), or a mature reflection (John); it's a gospel for absolutely everyone!!

Now ask a newspaper editor what sells the most copy and he will no doubt say: sex, royalty and religion (Pop stars love child, Princess had secret affair, & King's secret night with nun!!) So when people read the story of Gabriel visiting Mary, with the child to be born being the future Lord of the Cosmos, their minds easily jump in the way the newspapers have conditioned them to do. People have read into the story all sorts of things that aren't there, and have failed to notice some of the really important things that are.

Let's begin with the obvious point, nay stumbling block: the story makes it clear that Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb before she had had any sexual relations (this is what the Church came to call the 'virgin birth') Many people today find this impossible to believe,

but they often think that this difficulty has only arisen in modern times, because of all we now know of mechanics of conception and birth. Not so. The ancient world didn't know about the X chromosomes and Y chromosomes, but they knew as well as we do that babies were the result of sexual intercourse, and that people who claimed to be pregnant by other means might well be covering up a moral and social offence. Yet Mary's story is told by both Luke and Matthew, in versions so different that they can hardly be dependent on one another; in other words, the story seems to have been widely known in the very early church, rather than being a fantasy invented several generations after the fact. Why would these two writers, and devout Jewish Christian congregations that passed on such stories, have done so, making them hostages to fortune in this way, unless they had good reason to suppose they were true?

It is important to stress that the story says nothing about Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus' birth. That's a much later and again unhelpful churchy idea. Nor does it say anything about the goodness or badness of sexual identity or sexual relations. Whatever Luke (& Matthew) are trying to say with this story, they aren't saying that virginity is a morally better state than marriage. They are not denigrating sex, women, conception or birth. They are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in the ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given special grace to be the mother of God's incarnate self. Luke has no thought that this might make Jesus somehow less than fully human. Interestingly Scientists will say that virgin birth is in theory possible (it sometimes happens in small animals e.g. Lizards), and that a child thus produced would be a complete human being. The problem is that, always supposing such a thing was possible, the child would naturally be female. The truly remarkable thing, therefore, from a scientific point of view, is that Jesus was male. The angel gives what looks like a double explanation

for the whole event: The Holy Spirit will come upon you (Mary), enabling her (as the Spirit always does) to do and to be more than she could be by herself. But at the same time 'the power of the Most High' will overshadow her. This is something completely different: God Himself, the creator of the cosmos, will surround her completely with His sovereign power.

All this sounds extremely peculiar, but we should remember that in the Bible, and in Jewish and Christian thought at their best, the true God is the one in whose image humans were made in the first place. We aren't talking about a pagan God intervening roughly and inappropriately in the affairs of mortals, but about the one whom, as St Augustine said, made us for himself. When He takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love, love which will care for us and take us up into His saving purposes. Mary is, to that extent, the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings: the handmaiden of the Lord. God's power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would be unthinkable in any other way. Of course, no-one is likely to be convinced of Luke's story who isn't already in some sense open to the possibility that Jesus, though certainly a fully human being, was also the one in whom Israel's God has made his personal appearance on the stage of history. Neither Luke nor Matthew makes this suggestion. Paul never mentions the conception or birth of Jesus: the Death and Resurrection are for him of first importance. But to those who have come to some kind of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, whose minds are thus opened to God being uniquely present in him, there is a sense of appropriateness, hard to define, easy to recognise, about the story Luke & Matthew tell. It isn't what we expected, but somehow it rings true. Far more important than the whole story, though, is the political or royal meaning Luke gives to the whole event. The child is

be born will be the Messiah, the King of the house of David. God has promised David, a descendant who would reign forever - not only over Israel, but also over the whole world. And this coming King would be, in some sense, "God's Son" (2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 2:7, 89:27). As with a good deal of NT language about Jesus, this is both a huge theological claim (Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and now find hard to grasp and believe) and a huge political claim (Jesus is the true ruler of the world in way that leaves Caesar, and the powers of this world today a long long way behind!!)

Put all this together - the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all human empires - and we can see why the story is so explosive. Perhaps that's one reason why it so controversial. Perhaps some of the fuss and bother about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don't want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of absolute allegiance?

Whatever answer we give to that, we shouldn't miss the contrast Luke is drawing our attention to, between the muddled, puzzled Zechariah in the previous story and the obedient humility of Mary in this one. She too questioned Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for more information rather than proof. Faced with the choice to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of what this will involve, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God's unexpected vocation: "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, may it be to me as you have said."

So this Christmas Luke poses a challenge to you and me: Am I trusting God, is my relationship one of obedient trust and humble surrender? Could I be one of whom the Lord could entrust anything He chooses: Handmaiden or Manservant, that's the challenge and the choice. Let me repeat: Mary is the supreme example of what **always**

happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God's power from the outside, and the indwelling Spirit within, together result in things being done in a way unthinkable in any other way.

The word Christmas divides into two: Christ and Mass (in Spanish Mass simply means More!!). So this Christmas amid all our celebration and worship the acid test for me of my relationship with the Lord is will I be able to day in the New Year: this Christmas as the Lords Manservant I have received More of Jesus and as a result in 2014 I can be used more completely by Him!

Pastor David

December 8th 2013