

Isaiah 61. 1-4

Luke 1. 26 - 38

Luke 1. 46 - 55

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

Dare I venture here? Into virgin territory? In my first congregation there was a wonderful, devout woman, of prayer and kindness of heart. She had been a science teacher. She told me she crossed her fingers behind her back when we said either of the ancient creeds; the Apostles' or the Nicene Creeds.

In the translation we have just heard of what is known as the Annunciation what Mary says to Gabriel reads this way: 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' *I am a virgin!*

The biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, author of a commentary on Luke in the Sacra Pagina series of biblical commentaries, a highly regarded series, renders it this way: "How will this be, asks Mary, since I have no knowledge of a man."

The way Mary has been presented to us is as passive vessel. I am a virgin – this is my status. This is the identity given to me – this is how others see and define me. But the rendering, *since I have no knowledge of a man* suddenly renders Mary as active. She is not simply going to be a passive object of divine insemination but is able to be an active participant in whatever is going to unfold here. *Up until this point I have no knowledge of a man.* Let it be with me according to your word.

Like my devout science teacher, I feel a frequent reason for the rejection of being Christian goes like this: if I have to believe in the virgin birth, the Immaculate Conception: that I can't believe and so I won't participate in your mumbo-jumbo.

Let's look at this sonship of Jesus; what our scriptures say; and don't say.

Paul opens his letter to the Romans with this greeting: Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with

power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, - sonship according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.

And Mark, the earliest of the gospels, makes no mention of the circumstances around Jesus' birth but speaks of divine sonship like this: And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Gospel of John: well, John is more complicated: the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. The gospel of John is entirely about spirit – but spirit embodied in human flesh. And we have seen it.

And Matthew: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' To Matthew, Mary seems to be passive and Joseph the active player; the protector.

As we know, it is only in Matthew and Luke that there are actual birth narratives. Paul, Mark and John make no mention of an actual physical birth. As we contemplate what Matthew and Luke are trying to say about a miraculous birth of Jesus, it helps to know that three other famous ancient figures were believed to have been the result of miraculous conceptions – Perseus, the child of Zeus, Ion, the son of Apollo and Alexander the Great, also the son of Zeus. So Luke's audience would not have been surprised by this claim; it is entirely what happens in their world, a place where there is traffic between heaven and earth; between the divine and mortals.

We speak of the birth of Jesus and his conception as *The Immaculate Conception*. I got to wonder about this word immaculate. Is there a word maculate, I wondered? So, I looked it up. Maculate: blotched, impure, sordid, besmirched. So Jesus was immaculate – and we? We are all maculate – impure, sordid, besmirched. You wonder why Christians have such a such a disgust about the body? Look no further than this language.

Some assumptions about virginity flow from this. While a woman is still a virgin, she is pure, immaculate. When she is not, she is sordid. When a woman has had sex before marriage, she is damaged goods, so goes the degrading labelling. But of course to men, no such label might be applied.

The adjective virgin denotes a pure, unsullied, natural, unused, uncultivated and unexplored sort of state. Virgin bush, virgin land, terra nullius. So ripe for use, for exploration, exploitation, for consumption. These are definitions developed from the male perspective. It's the sort of mindset that climbs a mountain: because it's there. Because I can. A sort of conquering mindset.

I have recently read a book by Kathleen Norris entitled *The Cloister Walk*. Kathleen over some decades has, what you might say loitered around monasteries; spending long periods of time living in monasteries while writing. Or staying in them when visiting cities around the US. As an outsider, she observes the rhythm and practices of monastic life, participating with monks and sisters in their life, without taking vows. The book is a series of essays, reflections over years if not decades; a kind of slow coming to awareness or recognition of the meaning of things which undergird and inform the monastic commitments and rhythm. One of these commitments of course is the vow of celibacy.

Kathleen Norris notes that we seldom hear virginity defined from a woman's point of view. So, she asked a Benedictine sister about what virginity meant to her. The sister was startled to be asked such a question. "This is something I carry very deep within. ... that I carry secretly which is centred in the heart and which can be named singleness of heart." So, her virginity, her celibacy was not to do with the state of the vagina but the state of the heart.

The Benedictine sister continues: Virginity is a state that returns to God in wholeness. This wholeness is not having experienced all experiences, but of something reserved, preserved, or reclaimed for what it was made for. Virginity is the ability to stay centred, with oneness of purpose."

The 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic Thomas Merton used a French term for this place at the centre of our being: *Le point Vierge*. The virgin point.

At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.

In the opening greeting in the letter to the Romans Paul writes of Jesus' sonship in this way: *Jesus, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness ...* When we get stuck on what takes place with Mary as some kind of suspension of the natural order of things, we fail to be able to read beneath what is really taking place in a spiritual sense. And when we get stuck on literal questions we are

blind to that what is happening here is a spiritual reality - and so what might take place for us. Not for nothing does John say: *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

What the Benedictine sister writes of in herself and her celibacy is some ability to receive, a freedom to receive; an ability made possible because the heart is not distracted, or overloaded with a restless desire to have all things.

Mary receives. And something, some new thing is born in her. In her heart first. “How will this be, since I have no knowledge of a man.” Her question is a bit like Nicodemus’ response to Jesus: can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb?

The Magnificat is defiant. And angry. Even while Mary is at risk. Matthew tells us that Joseph protects Mary, because she is at risk of being stoned to death. Her pregnancy will bring shame on her father firstly, and then on Joseph to whom she is betrothed. She is sordid property. But in her defiance Mary sings:

... he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

Kathleen Norris explores the stories of the virgin martyrs in the early church. She dismisses the tendency to interpret the measure of their saintliness as their refusal to have sex with someone and so preserve their virginity. She refocusses it to recognise that they refuse to submit themselves as baby-factory to a society that saw them as an object to produce soldiers for the empire. The British saw the women as baby factories for cannon fodder of empire: Just lie back and think of England, dear. The early virgin martyrs of the first centuries of the church were martyred because they made the treasonous claim that they were made in the image of God, that their lord was Jesus, not Caesar – a God who sought peace amongst men – and so were feared because they refused to be reduced to handmaidens of a culture of death.

I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be with me ...

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

Mary, we must understand in term of ancient thinking was property. Property of her father, property then of Joseph. When the women of the village waved the bloodied bedsheets to the

gathered townspeople the morning after the marriage they waved their daughter's virtue as some kind of object, some kind of virtue signalling to all and sundry. Look, our daughter was pristine property. She's a quality object passed from one family to another; all this touted in the street.

We are rightly outraged by the appalling treatment of women which has escalated in recent times; the murder in Australia of more than one woman per week by intimate or former intimate partner, the misogyny in the workplace. The appalling case in France of the creep who invited men into his home to rape his drugged wife. The defiant Gisele Pelicot insists that it is her husband and his lecherous friends who must bear the shame; and not her.

As we hold up Mary as icon of what saintliness looks like, Mary as pattern for us of how the Christ might be born in us, we affirm that God may be born, indeed, maybe only can be born, in our places of shame, places which our society tell us must be hidden, disdained, considered sordid. But these are places which are fertile for the mercy of God to be sown and from which may emerge a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

May we come to know this life-giving mercy more deeply this Christmas, and so may the one who makes all things new be found in us.

Andrew Boyle