

Prayer

We praise You and bless You, Holy and majestic God. You stand above all the cultures, institutions, governments and organisations of the world with the authority of the only One who can control all things according to Your will and purpose. We place our trust in You because You have proved that in Jesus Christ You can defeat all evil with good. We praise You, Holy and Majestic Lord; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Open your Bible at a psalm; read it, and use its words as the basis of a your prayers for others

On-going prayers

- **Pray for major industrial nations** *Pray today for China, the emerging industrial powerhouse. Pray that it will become responsive to world affairs*
- *Pray today for the Copenhagen environmental summit*
- *Give thanks for those who have helped you in recent days*

Meditation

I go out to do my daily work;
With the radiance of a day's light
glowing on my every move:
The Creator knows my living.

I thank Him for this opportunity;
He has chosen me to do a task
and its doing is my fulfilment:
The Creator knows my working.

I focus to dispel my wandering;
The motivation of His presence
directs my mind and movement:
The Creator knows my thinking.

I serve the only God for all my life;
His wisdom ever goes before
and all my graft is for His glory;
The Creator knows my being.

Bible passage – Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,
²⁷ to a virgin pledged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ Gabriel came to her and said, 'Greetings, highly favoured one! The Lord is with you.'
²⁹ But she was deeply troubled by his words and questioned what sort of greeting this might be.
³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.
³¹ For you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.
³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.
³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have not had sex with a man?'

³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for this reason the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ Look now, your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.'

³⁸ Mary replied, 'Here am I, the Lord's servant, let it happen according to your word.' Then the angel left her.

Thought for the Day

Text

Luke 1:35

The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; for this reason the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Thought

With these words, Luke describes the conception of Jesus, both human and divine. The story is powerful and utterly beautiful, well known to us from Carol Services and Nativity plays. Yet these beautiful and dignified words portray both the mystery and reality of Jesus' birth as the Son of God.

Theories abound about the 'virgin birth', but why do we need to speculate? Is it not sufficient to know that God has come to us in human flesh? If, together with Mary, we respond to God's call with the purest of simple faith, and say 'Yes' to His individual plan for us, everything becomes possible!

Bible Study

Review

This is a beautiful and remarkable story, introducing Mary and describing the momentous events surrounding the conception of her son Jesus, the Son of God. At the heart of this story is a divine paradox of humanity and divinity created in human flesh, for the Messiah is to be born of a woman by means of a miracle beyond our comprehension. Throughout the centuries, people have argued about the 'virgin birth' as described here in this passage, yet for all our searching we have found nothing to add to what Luke has written. On the one hand it is a powerfully simple story told with the minimum of fuss, and on the other hand it breaks through all our preconceptions about the difference between God and humanity.

In the previous story, Gabriel appeared to the priest Zachariah in the Temple to announce the birth of John, the man who would announce the Messiah (1:5-25). Zachariah was troubled by what he heard and questioned Gabriel, and as a reward for his doubt he was struck dumb! Here, Gabriel appears to Mary, a young woman expecting to be married shortly to Joseph, to tell her the mind-boggling news that she will have a child, though a virgin! She is understandably perturbed and asks the same question as Zachariah, 'How can this be ...' (1:18,34), but something amazing happens. Mary has already found favour with God, so Gabriel offers this young woman blessing upon blessing (1:28, 30,35), answering her questions by promising her the presence of Almighty God (1:35)! Finally, after being given reassuring news about the pregnancy of her older relative Elizabeth, Mary ceases her questioning and submits to God's will and divine purpose; '*Here am I, the Lord's servant, let it happen according to Your word*' (1:38). These are possibly the most exquisite expressive words of pure faith to be found within the Bible, and in them, God's favour and Mary's pure trust combine to enable Jesus the Saviour to be born into our world.

Some of the details of the story are intriguing. Why is it that after centuries of performing miracles through the children born of barren women (see yesterday's study), God should now chose an unmarried virgin? Why does God chose a woman from Nazareth? What qualities might attract Mary to God even before she has expressed her trust and faith (1:30)? Why does Gabriel emphasise the earthly lineage of the child to be born, but state that her betrothed will not father the child? How indeed will the child be conceived within Mary's womb?

It is impossible for us to answer all these questions satisfactorily, but asking them may lead us into a deeper understanding of the nature of Jesus, of His humanity and His divinity. We will always be left with more questions, because what happened was a miracle. If we cannot live with this, then we will only search the text in frustration. What we can say for certain is that God's favour was given to Mary and she was to be blessed with the gift of a son even though she was betrothed and not yet married. The description given by

Luke of the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb does not dishonour Joseph, Mary's betrothed, and it does not describe impregnation by the Holy Spirit. He says that she will conceive because God will come close to her and His 'shadow' will fall on her (1:35), and we limit our understanding of the divine miracle if we trivialise these words or exaggerate them. Finally, Mary abandons her reticence and natural feminine caution and gives her wholehearted ascent to the angel; with the faith of innocence, she trusts the goodness of God.

People have argued over the details of this story for centuries. However, this does not change the fact that the Messiah was born of Mary, the woman who was the first to respond to God with faith in the New Testament. Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled, and God's work of redemption had begun.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why does this story have similarities to the announcement to Zachariah?
- What do we mean by the terms 'virgin birth' and 'incarnation'?
- What does this passage say about who Jesus is?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V27 'pledged'

This word is translated 'engaged' in many Bible versions, but this could be confusing, because the rituals of marriage were different to those of today. The Greek word 'mnesteuomai' refers to the betrothal of a woman and a man in marriage, and this formal promise of marriage was regarded as holy and unbreakable in itself. I have used the word 'pledged' in order to convey this sense of binding promise.

V27 'virgin'

The Greek word 'parthenos' means a young woman who is not yet married. In Jesus' day this meant that the woman was presumed to be a virgin, which is obviously true of this passage. It is worth noting that the Hebrew word used by Isaiah for his prophecy '*a young woman shall conceive and bear a son ...*' (Isaiah 7:14) also means a young woman with the same presumption of virginity.

V35 'overshadow'

The Greek word here means 'to cast a shadow'. See also Acts 5:15, where sick people attempt to stand in Peter's shadow, and Matthew 17:5, where the shadow of God covers the mountain of transfiguration like a cloud. Clearly, the presence of God in a cast shadow was an important concept to people in the first century, but it is important not to deviate too far from the meaning of this word. We must not read too much into its meaning (see study).

Significant phrases

V34 '*since I have not had sex with a man*'

Other translations:

'since I am a virgin' (NIV)

'since I do not know a man' (Authorised Version)

In this instance, the Authorised Version is close to the Greek, but this can be misunderstood today and does not help us understand the meaning of Mary's question. Mary simply asks the obvious question about how she can become pregnant when she has not had sex, and it is best not to beat about the bush and say this straight, which I have done. Most modern translations say 'since I am a virgin', which is neither what the text says or current good English.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V28 '*The Lord is with you.*'

Other translations:

'The Lord is with you' (NIV)

'The Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!' (Authorised Version)

The Authorised Version has an additional phrase here that is not found in the most ancient manuscripts. If you look further on to verse 42, you will see that at this point, Elizabeth cries out to Mary '*blessed are you amongst women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*' It seems that at some point in history, someone has inadvertently added a portion of verse 42 back into verse 28. In the context, it is an understandable mistake, but it has been unfortunately continued through its use in the Authorised Version alone.

V35 'the child to be born will be holy'

It is worth noting that in texts copied since the ninth century, this reads '*the child to be born to you will be holy*'. The additional words '*to you*' were added by copyists who were fascinated by the patterns and style of this part of the story, which they believed was a hymn. They felt that the addition of 'you' at the end of the third line was logical, and must have been omitted by mistake:

'The Holy Spirit will come on you
the power of the Most High will overshadow you
so the child to be born **to you**
Will be called the Son of God.'

Unfortunately, they were entirely wrong to analyse the text like this, and although their error was minor and apparently means little, it is a warning to us not to fiddle with the text.

Going Deeper

Why does this story have similarities to the announcement to Zachariah?

Scholars as well as ordinary readers have long since noticed the strong literary links between the stories of the announcement of the birth of John, the forerunner, and the announcement of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah (see above). In each, Gabriel speaks firstly to make the announcement (1:13-17 and 1:28-33). Then Zachariah asks 'How will I know ...?' (1:18), and in parallel to this Mary asks 'How can this be ...?' (1:34). Gabriel then replies to the inner heart of each individual. Zachariah's doubt yields a punishment (1:19,20), whilst Mary's inner faith is rewarded by a further promise of blessing and the support of her relative Elizabeth (:35-37). Though his wife becomes pregnant, Zachariah is left confused; whereas the angel leaves Mary in peace and full of faith.

Is this too stylised to be the story of real events? In asking this, we ignore the integrity and art of Luke, who researched the story and then wrote it down not to deceive us with literary devices but to highlight truth. The conception of the Son of God is nothing other than a most profound mystery, and it was real, touching the lives of real people. Luke has succeeded in conveying this not just by telling the story, but by comparing it with the more earthy story of Zachariah. Most of us can identify with Zachariah because he comes across as an ordinary man caught up in spectacularly unusual events. When we read the story of Mary, however, we find ourselves caught up in so much more; we touch events of spiritual power and significance far greater than anything in the entire Old Testament. Even the words themselves are astonishingly clear and precise. Apart from a few amendments to the story made by later copyists (see notes above), the Greek is so straightforward that most Bible versions are identical! The profound mystery of the creation of the Son of God, divinity and humanity created as one in the womb of a woman, has been conveyed to us in an unforgettable story of utmost beauty and majesty.

This is how God chose to come into the world, and the Holy Spirit has surely been at work in the writing of this story so that we know we are touching the mystery of God Himself. Luke is quite clear; God chose Mary as the mother of His Son, and all he required of her was the simple and absolute faith of a willing servant. Mary was not special because she possessed qualities that endeared her to God; she was made just like everyone else, as someone with the gifts necessary for her role and work in God's Kingdom. She stands with all the greats of the Bible (see, Judges 6:12 and Ruth 2:14) as someone who used the gifts she was given and is now a superb and Biblical example of faith.

What do we mean by the terms 'virgin birth' and 'incarnation'?

Mary was a young woman, promised in marriage to Joseph and therefore in Jewish culture, a virgin (see notes). Her initial response to Gabriel's message is of incredulity, for how could she conceive without sex (see notes)? Her pregnancy would place her forthcoming marriage at great risk, but Luke strangely does not comment on this (we find it in Matthew 1:18-25). Luke's Gospel focuses on the great joy amongst ordinary God-fearing people because of the evidence of God's work amongst them. Although these people were country folk living a long distance from the Temple, the centre of Jewish religious life, Luke tells us that they understood the work of God. Only later, after Jesus' birth, does Luke tell us about how people in the Temple responded to the coming of the Messiah (2:21-52).

In probably the most enigmatic expression in the entire story, Luke says of Mary *'the power of the Most High will overshadow you'* (1:35). This sentence addresses the heart of our question, 'how can a child be conceived within Mary's womb without her having sex?' Fancifully, there have always been those who believed that the Holy Spirit in some way 'impregnated' the virgin Mary. However, Luke, together with all Jewish people and early Christians would have been appalled at the suggestion. The Roman world was full of stories of the gods having sex with people in order to create superheroes, emperors and other minor 'gods'. This was the speculative world of religion they despised and regarded as ungodly. It is ignorant of us to suggest that the Holy Spirit had sex with Mary because in so saying we show that we have not understood what Luke says in his story. He says only that Mary was 'overshadowed' by the Holy Spirit (1:35).

The word 'overshadow' is used in Scripture to refer to something on which a shadow falls. This is true of Isaiah's prophesy, where he says to King Hezekiah that the shadow on a sundial would move back as a sign to him of God's command of history (2 Kings 20:1-11), and also the story of people placed in Peter's shadow in order to be healed (Acts 5:15). This last example tells us that the shadow was not regarded as the mere absence of light, but an indication of a real but incomplete spiritual presence, for example, *'the festivals ... are only a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ'* (Colossians 2:17 and also Hebrews 8:5 etc.). Luke says therefore that God came to Mary not completely, but in part, to do a special work in her womb. So, we who have scientifically enquiring minds may suggest that God did a special work of grace to enable the fertilisation of an egg in Mary's womb, thus making the embryo of our Saviour Jesus both human and divine. Beyond this it is surely presumptive and ignorant of us to guess.

What does this passage say about who Jesus is?

Jesus' birth brings together a series of important words and concepts that tell us about the nature of God's Messiah. At the beginning of the first century AD there was much speculation about this, and which prophecies of the Old Testament pointed to the Messiah. Today, we are used to reading Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, 11:2 and chapter 53, and interpreting them as prophecies of the Messiah as a King and also a 'suffering servant'. It is hard for us to understand that many other Scriptures were regarded as speaking of the Messiah; for example, that He would be of the line of Aaron, God's 'High Priest' Messiah (see Exodus 40:10-12, a passage that describes a perpetual priesthood in the service of God). Records of the writings of rabbis in the first century BC are full of such speculation, and Luke's record stands as both a confirmation of who the Messiah is and a rebuttal of who He is not!

Firstly, the 'virgin birth' describes Jesus as both God and man created in the womb of Mary (see above). In this He fulfils Isaiah's 'birth prophecies' of a King (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, 11:2). Luke ensures that we understand this not just by his description of Mary and her response, but by reporting the speech of the angel Gabriel. He speaks about God as 'the Most High' (1:32,35), a Greek translation of the emphatic Hebrew phrase 'Eli-Elyon', also known as 'Almighty God'. People at the time of our story regarded these words as a title to be used for the Messiah! Then, in verse 32, Luke confirms God's calling of the Messiah from 'the throne of his ancestor David', directly evoking the words of God spoken to David:

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. (2 Samuel 7:12-14)

Later in the Gospel, Luke records the genealogical line linking Jesus to David through Joseph; but is it not sufficient that God should declare His Son a 'Son of David'? Luke, however, knew that Jesus' earthly connection with David meant a great deal. The descendants of David had long since disappeared from the 'throne of Israel'. The Babylonians had destroyed the heritage of David when the Temple was destroyed in 587BC and they took David's descendants to the royal court in Babylon (2 Kings 24). All earthly rulers since had been placed over Israel by empires and emperors; King Herod was no Jew.

God's Son was to be born with a full earthly lineage and history, and a full divine lineage and history. This is why we can say that God's Son is real, and He is not a construction of religious sentiment. Is it impossible for God to do this? No. As the angel Gabriel says, repeating a great 'line' of Scripture found throughout its pages 'nothing is impossible for God' (1:37, see also Gen 18:14, Job 10:13, Jeremiah 32:27, Zechariah 8:6, Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27 etc.).

Application

This is a story of pure faith. Now you may find that in the course of your life and discipleship, things can become very complicated. It can be difficult to know how to speak about Jesus in a world where people will be offended if others confront their beliefs. Traditional Christian beliefs are challenged from every angle, philosophically, religiously and scientifically. People who attend church can have very set views about a vast range of issues making discussion of faith quite difficult at times. So a Scriptural story describing faith in such a beautiful and straightforward manner is powerful and refreshing. God's people must not allow the

complexities of life to cloud their judgement about faith, allowing 'simple' faith to become confused with 'simplistic' faith. Our story here is about 'simple faith' at its most powerful. Mary shows us that our lives are most blessed when we drop our pre-conceptions, our problems and our worries, and rely utterly on the grace and favour of God already revealed to us. There is no force on earth capable of standing in the way of faith like this.

True, there is so much more for us to discover about Jesus and the salvation He offers. Jesus teaches us about the full nature of God and the reality of the human condition, so that when we respond in faith to Him we may indeed be truly repentant and willing to be changed and 'born anew' (John 3:3f.). Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God, which we may experience now as a sample of what God has for us in the future, beyond death. His battles with the evils of religiosity, with the devil's temptations and with Satan's power in this world reveal the nature of the battles we face while living in a mortal and sinful world. Yet our starting point is the miracle of grace whereby any one of us may, with Mary, perceive that God's hand is indeed upon us and we are blessed, because He loves us. Then, with powerful and utterly simple integrity, we say our 'Yes' to God's 'Yes', and the eternal contract of salvation is opened out before us through Jesus our Saviour.

For centuries, the Catholic church has valued Mary as the mother of Jesus, yet the historic though not official equation drawn by many devout people between the saving power of Jesus and the place of Mary in the church has created divisions and drawn the church close to heresy. The Protestant church should now seek to value Mary for what God has done through her according to Scripture, and do so without shame or fear. We must surely accept her unique example of pure faith and service, and we should give thanks that it powerfully illustrates the glory of God's salvation. Mary's faith is a vital part of the Gospel because God used it to begin the path of Salvation. Her faith is pure, it is simple, it is offered to all, including the least significant in society, and it is all sufficient. It scatters all human preconceptions of religion and is immediately applicable to real life. Let us rejoice in it.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the faith of Mary illustrate to you, and how can God's people learn from her response to God?
2. What does it mean to say that Jesus will be 'holy', and be called the 'Son of God'? How do people in our world respond to such claims?
3. How does God show His favour to people today? How do we experience God's blessing on our lives, even in the midst of difficulties?

Topics covered by this text

- *The birth of Jesus Christ*
- *The Incarnation*
- *The faith of Mary*

Personal comments by author

This is one of those passages of Scripture that is so powerful, we could continue to study almost infinitely and still not exhaust the possibilities of God's Word. I have always found it incredible that God chose to begin the work of salvation by focussing on a woman and not a man, and for this reason, we are duty bound to pay special attention to Mary and her role in God's salvation. Jesus is our Saviour, not Mary, though her example of faith is one of the most powerful in Scripture; her faith endured every imaginable test in the course of her life until we see her at the end of the Gospel at the foot of the Cross. We must learn from what the Scriptures say about her

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Over a period of a week, read through this passage each day and allow its message to speak to you in different ways. Make a record of the different things that come to you in the course of the week.*
- *Write down what you think is the simplest definition of faith, using this passage to guide you.*

Final Prayer

Bless us with true peace, Lord Jesus we pray. Love us, heal us, comfort us, guide us, forgive us, encourage us, empower us and challenge us we pray. Turn us into people fit for active service in the Kingdom of our God; we praise You Lord Jesus Christ! AMEN
