

Advent Four 2107

Do you believe in the virgin birth? This was a question put to variety of notable folk a few years ago by the British magazine *The Spectator*. Of the responses most of them were fairly predictable. The Archbishop of Canterbury said yes, Christopher Hitchens said no!

One person said: *Look, I've successfully survived 42 years as a member of the Church of England without ever having to give serious thought to the Virgin Birth and I jolly well don't see why I should be put on the spot now. I guess that makes me a 'Don't Know', which is a terrible thing to admit given that I'm halfway towards being a pillar of my beloved Chelsea Old Church. But that's the great thing about being C of E, isn't it? If I were Catholic, I suppose I'd have to find the issue intensely important. Me, I care more about hymns having the right tunes, and the Prayer Book being 1662. Now that's a proper Anglican response for you!*

Many folk claim that Jesus is one of many to claim a miraculous birth: Krishna, Horus, Mercury, Romulus or even members of North Korea's Kim Dynasty. But this fails to take into account the fact that this Holy Spirit that came upon Mary, this giver of life, this animator, is the same Holy Spirit that animates each one of *us*. It is the spark of the divine within each one of *us*. Those mythical figures and their virgin mothers are not people that we can relate to in any way...in the gospels Mary is a real person, we can engage with her.

Contemporary writer Sally Cunneen in her book on Mary writes: *In looking for Mary we are looking for ourselves. Mary is not exclusively Catholic or Jewish, western or eastern, but a sign of what women and men can be when they participate in the ongoing mystery that links the divine to all that is. I rather like the older poem by Angelus Silesius a 17th century Catholic mystic: If by God's Holy Ghost thou art beguiled, there will be born in thee the eternal child. If it's like Mary, virginal and pure then God will impregnate your soul for sure. God make me pregnant and with his spirit shadow me. That God may rise up in my soul and shatter me. What good does Gabriel's 'Ave Mary' do, unless he give me that same greeting too?*

Can we expect the same greeting, men and women, mothers, fathers? Jesus encourages us all to a childlike faith and Mary, this young woman, a mere child, pre-empts those words and becomes a model of faith *the* means by which God and humanity become one. As the poet Edwin Muir said: *The angel and the girl are met, earth is the only meeting place.* Inevitably Mary, confused and surprised, doubts the promise, 'how can this be?' Little wonder! Sarah Coakley the British theologian writes of the dying and birthing of the annunciation: 'it is part of the paradox of losing and finding that we see so often in the gospels' - coins and sheep, life itself. Rather than seeing Mary as naïve, submissive Coakley sees in her someone whose potential has been realised, a young woman empowered, *this* is how it can be! We mustn't read the story of the visit of the angel without hearing

Mary's response in the Magnificat, hardly the words of a submissive young woman. More political manifesto!

Sometimes though we have to resort to art and music because in them there is this quality that points to something beyond itself. The Annunciation is one of the Biblical scenes most frequently depicted in art. Andy Warhol's 'Annunciation' just has two hands, the angelic hand held out in blessing and Mary's hand held out to receive. It's like the great picture of creation God reaching out to Adam by Michelangelo on the roof of the Sistine chapel. God speaks the creation into being and in Mary's 'Yes' to the Angel, we, humanity, fulfil our vocation as being made in the image of the creative God. When we say 'Yes' we enable God's creative, redemptive power. And music? Let's stay with the twentieth century; I can't help but be fascinated by the Beatles and the iconic 'Let it be.' Whatever Lennon and McCartney were thinking when they penned these words there is truth in their lyrics, Mary's 'yes' is an example to us:

*When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be.....They are indeed words of wisdom.*

And sometimes when art and music don't do it, we must just rest in the gospel. Given the place of Mary in the gospels it remains to me a source of sadness that all too often Mary's role has been diminished and she has become a figure that has divided the church. Isaiah's prophecy says "*the*" young woman will bear a child (7:10-16). We did not know who the "*the*" would be until Mary was singled out to be the mother of Jesus. Not just any young Jewish girl would do. The one to carry Jesus would be named "*Mary.*"

The gospels describe real people; Mary and Joseph are not ideas. They are real people who made decisions on which our faith now depends. I have been reading Stanley Hauerwas this week he wrote: Christianity is not a timeless set of ideas. Christianity is not some ideal toward which we ought always to strive even though the ideal is out of reach. Christianity is not a series of slogans that sum up our beliefs. Christianity cannot be so easily "summed up" even by the best of slogans or ideas. It cannot be summed up because our faith depends on a young Jewish mother called Mary.

Mary and Joseph are real people who had to make decisions. They would determine the destiny of the world. Isaiah had foretold that a Mary would come, but we had no idea what Isaiah's prophecy meant until Mary became the Mother of God; and with her and Joseph we await his birth.

And when the broken-hearted people
Living in the world agree
There will be an answer.....Let it be. Amen.