

## How Can This Come About?

Mary's question to the Archangel is worth our pondering. As a young girl preparing for marriage who knows what *virginity* means, we are not to think that she needs telling how a virgin becomes a mother. Mary is clearly not a child. Rather, the question is asked so that the Archangel can give her a new answer, a different answer from the obvious one. So what does the angel say?

### **“The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You”**

The activity of the Holy Spirit is uniquely present in Luke's Gospel. In the fourth Gospel it is stated specifically that the Spirit could not be given until Jesus was raised from the dead; yet in Luke we find the work of the Spirit in the very first pages – guiding Simeon to the Temple, for example, on the day the Messiah enters it. In the story of the Annunciation, the work of the Spirit is central to what is happening. What is being described is the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary; and this will come about through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is very mysterious: because conception is a most thoroughly physical reality. In what sense can it be explained as work for a Spirit? The answer lies in the first paragraph of the Bible: *In the beginning God (who is Spirit) created heaven and earth. Now the earth was a formless void: there was darkness over the abyss, and the breath of God swept over the waters.* “Breath of God” is the Hebrew concept which became “Spirit” in the later books of the Bible. So in St Luke's Annunciation story, Gabriel is evoking the Creation: Mary's virginity represents the empty abyss, and the conception of Jesus signals the beginning of a new creation.

### **The Overshadowing Power**

An even more important Jewish story than the Creation account was the story of Israel coming out of Egypt through the power of God. Luke's angel promises Mary: *the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.* It was in the Exodus that the presence of God with his people was represented as a protecting cloud which overshadowed them from the sun as they crossed the desert. So Gabriel is assuring Mary that the unfolding of her motherhood will take place under the same protecting

power as did the Exodus, the most dramatic experience of God Mary's people had ever known. Remember how the Exodus gave us the story of the Red Sea, from which our Baptismal ceremony draws its power, and the story of the Manna from heaven, which lies behind our Eucharist: the Exodus gave the Jews the feast of Passover, which became our Easter. The Exodus is like a huge sacrament in which the people of Israel met God and knew him as Saviour.

### **Creator And Redeemer**

So Mary's question yields us great insight. We learn that the advent of Jesus will inaugurate a new Universe, and that God is about to respond to the prayer of the psalmist: *We have heard of your marvellous deeds, done in the days of our fathers: do them again in our day: work further wonders.* But we should not think that in this way God himself changes. The change he effects on the world by this new deed is part of his eternal plan; God the Creator and God the Redeemer are one, and the mind of God does not evolve, like a human mind, on the basis of experience. The exciting thing to me about the discovery of God is precisely the discovery of the way in which his divine deeds are consistent. Often, in the drama of historic happenings, I fail to understand that this is so.

*“Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde,  
Hae mercy on my soul, Lord God;  
As I wad do, were I Lord God,  
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde.”*

I sense my grasp on the mind of God reeling and collapsing all the time, because, like Martin Elginbrodde, I want to impose my ideas on God. His thought, however, is always and will always be wonderfully beyond mine. That is the joy of God! Wisdom will come when I know when to fall silent before him, and to wait for the revelation of his mind. *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.* The terror and glory of that experience opens the way for the coming of God into the world. Let no twittering of our small minds stand in its way this Advent.  
*Fr Philip*