

The image of Mary hurrying into the hill country of Judaea is one of great beauty. We are to think of a young woman with a great deal going on in her heart, newly pregnant, not merely with her own child, but with the hope of the world. From this darkest part of the year, it is a scene of the Springtime.

How are we to think of the story of Jesus' virginal conception? I think it's a genuinely problematic story for us, with our very rational approach to such matters; believing the impossible is *not* the point; God doesn't make a selection amongst human beings according to their willingness to believe the impossible.

What does the Bible - in this case, what do the evangelists Matthew and Luke - want us to understand by their story of the virginal conception?

Firstly, forget the modern assumption that the Bible disparages human sexuality. Later generations have; but the Bible doesn't: Jewish religion in general would be incapable of it. Sex for the Bible is good, it brings human nature closest to divine life: remember Genesis:

*In the image of God he created them
male and female he created them
and he blessed them and said to them
Increase, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it*

Jesus wasn't given a virgin birth because an ordinary sexual generation would have *defiled* him in any way.

Secondly, just as the motherhood of Mary does not rob him of his divine status, nor would the fatherhood of Joseph have. Sonship of God would never have been in competition with any earthly parentage: the two relationships are of a different order. On the other hand, the absence of any rôle for an earthly father draws attention to the paternity of God, just as Jesus says *Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my mother, and sister, and brother* (but *not* "my father").

Thirdly, the theme of Jesus' lack of an earthly father isn't central in the Gospel itself. No-one in the Gospel ever refers back (as spiritual writers love to do) to these birth-narratives: no-one ever remembers that there were angelic annunciations, or signs in the sky, or wise men from the east. When his family come to capture him and take him back home, they are as challenged by his mission as if they knew nothing of these things; and in John's Gospel his brothers are openly contemptuous of his claims and his movement. In short, the sheaf of prophecies and revelations that we see in the birth stories have sunk without trace; even Mary and Joseph hear him say *I must be about my father's business* and have no idea what he means by it.

When Mary says *but I am a virgin*, in Luke's Gospel the angel replies: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High cover you with its shade*. These phrases evoke the Spirit of God which came upon the empty waters of chaos in the beginning, and the outstretched arm of God who shaded his people through the desert: in other words, the direct assistance of the Creator and the Redeemer will overcome the emptiness of the Virgin's womb. These positive understandings connect this new birth to the whole Scriptural heritage; it is as if God is beginning a new Creation, a new humanity; and he is recalling the Exodus which created a new people for him. It is to make room for these themes that Luke makes Jesus' conception the place of a direct divine deed. *That* is what the Gospel wants us to believe. It says it in a story that would be understood with wonder by a first-century man. We must try to listen to the meaning, and let the story live for us because of what it means.