

CHAPTER EIGHT: JESUS' CONCEPTION

The Letter to the Hebrews says of Jesus: 'He had to become like us his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 4:15). What are we to make of the statements found in the Prologues of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew that speak of Jesus' conception by a virgin and God's Spirit? Are the Gospels asking us to believe that in this respect Jesus is not like us?

Luke writes: 'The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary' (Luke 1:26-27). She is told that she is to conceive one who 'will be called the Son of the Most High' (Luke 1:32). Mary says to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel says to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God' (Luke 1:34-35).

In the Apostles' Creed we declare: 'I believe in Jesus, God's only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.' The faith of the Church is based on Luke's account. To be clear about our faith we need to ask: 'what is Luke asserting?'

The first point to make is that Luke is asserting that Jesus is the 'Son of God' – a teaching that recurs throughout Luke's Gospel and Acts; indeed, throughout the whole of the New Testament. In his account of Jesus' baptism Luke states: 'A voice came from heaven: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). Likewise in his account of Jesus' transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the three disciples hear God declare: 'This my Son, the Chosen; listen to him' (Luke 9:35). Jesus prays: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Luke 10:22). In a parable referring to himself as sent by God, Jesus states: 'The owner of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; surely they will respect him' (Luke 20:13). After describing Paul's enlightenment on the road to Damascus, Luke states 'immediately Saul began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God' (Acts 9:20).

We find the same teaching in Luke's teacher, Paul. A few examples should suffice. Paul writes: 'God revealed God's Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16). 'I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman' (Galatians 4:4). 'God is faithful; by him you were called into the communion of God's Son, Jesus the Messiah, our Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:9). 'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13). 'The Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, whom we proclaimed among you, was not "Yes and No"; in him it is always "Yes" (2 Corinthians 1:19). In the opening words of his Letter to the churches in Rome Paul introduces himself: 'Paul, a servant of Jesus the Messiah, 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 God's 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, Jesus the Messiah, our Lord' (Romans 1:1-4). Later in the same Letter we read: 'I serve God

with my spirit by announcing the gospel of God's Son' (Romans 1:9). 'We were reconciled to God through the death of God's Son' (Romans 5:10).

So the first thing that Luke is asserting in the Prologue is that Jesus is the Son of God.

Luke's second point is that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. This is also at the heart of Christian faith. From his conception Jesus is open to the intimate communion that God is offering him. It is to this intimate communion that we refer when we speak of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, Luke's account has something to say about Jesus' mother: she is a virgin. Does this mean that God miraculously intervened, bypassing Joseph, and enabling Mary to conceive Jesus while remaining physically a virgin? This is how Christians have traditionally understood it. Is that what Luke is asserting? It is important that faith seeks understanding. This must be a humble seeking for we are dealing with matters that concern God, and so are mysterious.

Our faith that Jesus is God's Son is not dependent on Mary's physical virginity. When we speak of God as Jesus' Father, we are asserting that everything that Jesus is, and everything he says and does comes from God. We are not speaking of biological paternity.

In the rest of the Prologue and throughout his Gospel and Acts, Luke does not refer again to Mary as a virgin. It is only stated here in Luke 1:26-35. Later in his Prologue, we are told: 'the child's father and mother were amazed' at what Simeon was saying about the child Jesus (Luke 2:13). We are told that 'every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover' (Luke 2:41). Jesus went with them, but went missing. Luke writes that when 'his parents found him, his mother said to him: Child, why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety' (Luke 2:48). None of these texts leave us with the impression that Jesus' family life was unlike ours.

Another factor to consider is that Luke's Prologue introduces the reader to key theological assertions that are central to his presentation of Jesus in his Gospel. Its focus is not on biography. Luke's powerful stories prepare the reader for his interpretive commentary.

Furthermore, again and again the New Testament speaks of Jesus as 'the Son of God', but Mary's virginity is never mentioned by Mark, never mentioned in the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple, never mentioned by Paul in any of his letters. We find no mention of it in any of the other letters in the New Testament, or in the Apocalypse. Jesus being the Son of God is at the heart of the teaching of the New Testament. We cannot claim the same for Mary's virginity.

To understand Luke's purpose in presenting Mary as a virgin we need to examine the thinking of those for whom he is writing. Luke's readers were familiar with legends that stated that the founders of the great cities of the Greco-Roman world had a god for their father and a virgin for their mother. Romulus and Remus are celebrated as twin brothers, the sons of a vestal virgin named Rhea Silvia and the god Mars. Asclepius was the son of Apollo. His mother was the virgin Coronis. Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda. Alexander, the Ptolemies, and the Caesars were said to have been 'virgin-born'. Is Luke speaking of Mary as a virgin to state, using language that his readers would understand, that it is Jesus who is divine (the Son of God), not the heroes of their myths, or their emperors?

Virgil (70-19BC) writes that shepherds heralded Augustus's birth. His birth is called 'good news' ('evangelion'). Augustus the new-born child is proclaimed saviour (soter) and described as lord (kyrios). He is seen as the bringer of a new age of peace. He is called the son of God. He shows exceptional qualities at the age of twelve, and so it goes on. In his *Lives of the Caesars* Suetonius (69-122AD) says that there were prophecies and portents before the birth of Augustus, whose conception was miraculous. It took place in the context of worship at a temple. Upon his birth, Augustus was declared to be a King and a Ruler. Luke mentions Augustus (Luke 2:1) to tell his readers to look to Jesus, not Augustus, as their 'saviour' and 'peacemaker'

There is one other place where Mary is called a virgin. It is in the Gospel of Matthew, but, once again, it is only in the Prologue, not in the body of the Gospel. Commenting on Matthew's prologue, Ulrich Luz writes: 'We do not need to assume that this story, which strongly follows traditional schemas, contains information from the circle of Jesus' family. Nor are the signs favourable for the historicity of the virgin birth ['virginal conception'], which in the New Testament is transmitted only by Matthew and Luke ... It is probably part of the attempt of Jewish Christian communities to bear witness to Jesus who was appointed by God as Son according to the Spirit (Romans 1:4) in a way that was analogous to other ancient stories in the form of an infancy narrative. The virgin birth [conception] then is a means of confessing faith and has no historical background' (*Commentary on Matthew*, Fortress Press 2007 volume I page 93).

We have already quoted from the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17). 'We have a high priest who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15). This is picked up in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: 'The Son of God worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart. He has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin' (*The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* n. 22 par 2).

In portraying Mary as a virgin in language familiar to his audience, Luke reinforces his focus on God as Jesus' 'Father', and on Jesus' intimacy with the one he called 'Abba'. Luke's scene of the virginal conception is also a beautiful way of portraying the special relationship between Mary and God. A virgin is a person who gives his or her first love to another. Mary's first love was for God, and the conception of Jesus was a fruit of that special love. Would that every conception came from such a communion.

François Bovon in his *Commentary on Luke in the Hermeneia Series* 2002 (volume 1, page 45) writes: 'Biblical marriages are sometimes spiritualized in the Hellenistic Judaism of Egypt, where sexual vocabulary is applied to the mystical union with God. In Philo it becomes clear that births like that of Isaac were regarded as virgin births; for Philo himself these are only an allegory of the ecstatic union of the soul with God.'

In repeating Luke's description of Mary as a virgin, is the Christian community (however it has imagined this over the centuries) been keeping before us the intimate relationship between Jesus and the God he called 'Abba'; a communion that we speak of when we refer to the Holy Spirit?