

4. For us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

The central doctrine of the Christian Faith is the Incarnation – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – and why was this? Well as we say in the creed, ‘For us men and our salvation’. Yes the word became flesh for us in order to save us by reconciling us with God- the Father sent his son as saviour of the world.

As St Gregory of Nyssa wrote

‘Sick, our nature demanded to be healed; fallen, to be raised up; dead, to rise again. We had lost possession of the good; it was necessary for it to be given back to us. Closed in the darkness captives, we awaited a Saviour.’

The fact that the Son of God took on our human nature, this is the distinctive note of the Christian Faith- Jesus Christ, true God from true God, but truly man also. We do not believe in some strange mix of the divine and the human, rather Jesus becomes truly man whilst remaining truly God. It took the Church some centuries to clarify this. In the early days, the first heresies denied not so much Christ’s divinity, as his true humanity – God masquerading as man. By the third century it was then necessary for the Church to affirm that Jesus was Son of God, by nature and not by adoption – as confessed in the Creed at Nicea in 325, as we looked at in the first series on the Creed. That the ‘Son of God, is begotten not made of the same substance (or being) as the Father. No magic trick, some human person joined to the divine person of God’s son, not born like any other person as the Council of Ephesus declared in 431. ‘Born according to the flesh’ and as the Council of Chalcedon affirmed in 451.

We confess one Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity, like us in all things but sin! Begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.’ ‘Incarnate of the Virgin Mary’.

And it was at the Annunciation that Mary was invited to conceive the one in whom the fullness of deity would dwell bodily. And how was this to happen? Well the angel tells Mary, the Holy Spirit will come upon you! So it is that ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit’, ‘the Lord and giver of life’ sanctifies the womb of the Virgin Mary, causing her to conceive the eternal Son of the Father in a humanity drawn from her own.

Scripture asserts ‘that God sent forth his Son’, but to prepare a body for him, he wanted the free cooperation of a creature. For this from all eternity, God chose for the Mother of his Son, a daughter of Israel, a young Jewish Girl from Nazareth in Galilee, a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David’ and the Virgin’s name was Mary.

Like Mary, as we state what we believe we probably wonder about the how? Without getting too basic, the Church has always believed and says so in the Nicene Creed that Jesus was conceived solely ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit’. The early Fathers saw in this virginal conception, the sign that it was truly the Son of God who came in a humanity like our own. The Gospel accounts understand the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility. The angel tells Joseph that this is the work of the Holy Spirit and in this the Church sees the fulfillment of the divine promise given through the prophet Isaiah – ‘Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.’ Faith in the virginal conception of Jesus has always met with opposition, mockery or sheer incomprehension. That’s why it’s meaning is only accessible through faith, as is our understanding of the whole mystery of Christ’s life from his coming in flesh to his passing from our sight.

If we want to delve deeper into the mystery of the virgin birth, and here we go from the basic to the technical- the Church believes, and you may not realise this, that Mary’s real and perpetual virginity was maintained even in the act of giving birth to our Lord. As the catechism teaches us, Christ’s birth ‘did not diminish his mother’s virginal integrity but sanctified it – thus we call her ‘ever virgin’.

But why? What is so important about Mary’s virginal motherhood? This most sacred of mysteries at which we bow the head or bend the knee as we say the Creed? Well first Mary’s virginity shows God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation – Jesus has only God as Father – he was never estranged from the Father because of the human nature he took for himself. He is naturally Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally Son of his mother as to his humanity – but properly Son of the Father in both those natures. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit because he is the New Adam – the first man Adam was from the earth, a man of dust says St. Paul, the second is from Heaven. And it is through his virginal conception that the ‘new Adam’ ushers in a new birth for all of us so that we can once more participate in the divine life for which we too were created.

Turning to what theologians have to say on the subject, first Newman, he wrestled with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, when he was an Anglican he speaks of Mary as 'raised above the condition of sinful beings, though by nature a sinner: brought near to God, yet but a creature', and urging us not to dwell over much on the subject for it is beyond our limited understandings! Later in life as he considers Mary's role as the 'instrument' of our salvation. He ponders on her sinlessness and her virginity, asking 'Who can estimate the holiness and perfection of her who was chosen to be the Mother of Christ.' 'What think you was the sanctified state of that human nature of which God formed his sinless son?' Newman calls her 'a pure and spotless virgin' for, he adds 'Christ did not clothe himself in that corrupt flesh which Adam's race inherits. Yes our Lord came as the son of man, but not the son of sinful Adam, and so here the virginal conception is key – Jesus has no earthly father! Furthermore says Newman 'If it was necessary that Christ should not owe his birth to the will of a human father, it was equally imperative that the human mother who conceived and bore him should not be like other mothers.'

No 'He came by a new and living way; not formed out of the ground, as Adam was at first... but selecting and purifying unto himself a tabernacle out of that which existed... deriving his manhood from the substance of the Virgin Mary.'

Set apart by her creator, the curse pronounced on Eve was changed into blessing...(and so) the means by which salvation came into the world. Of her own immaculate conception – yes, says Newman, its unique, her preservation from original sin, but he's basically saying to those who find it difficult 'get over it' Of course its unusual, but its simply the 'one instance' of 'what the 'Creator had intended the human race to be in its original state!' She is no different to Adam in that she received grace from the moment of her creation – the difference being she never 'incurred Adam's deprivation.'

From a more modern Anglican perspective, for that is what we are, Professor Quick says that 'the doctrinal considerations must be the determining factor upon the subject.' As he goes on to say ' the strictly historical evidence is quite insufficient to satisfy anyone that the Virgin Birth is a fact, who is not already... strongly inclined to believe in the truth of the Incarnation' adding as an Anglican, ' that is not to say there is not historical evidence – puzzling and ambiguous as it may be'!! He concludes that it is theology that must determine our belief, our focus being on the question of whether the virgin birth is an integral part of the Christian Gospel and the doctrine of the Incarnation. He argues in favour of our belief in the Virgin Birth, by citing the unbroken and universal tradition from the 2nd century onwards, going on to say that the Virgin Birth is so peculiarly appropriate a sign and expression of the new creation of man by a divine act in the person of Jesus Christ that belief in it is practically inseparable from a genuine and full belief in the Incarnation.

Our old friend Prof. Maquarrie basically says the same, he too says the doctrine has to be judged above all from a theological point of view, and in any case he finds it surprising that it should arouse so much controversy! He concludes that there is little point in talking about the historicity of the Virgin Birth rather we should ask ourselves whether this doctrine helps us understand and see better Jesus as the Incarnate Word. He dismisses the argument that if Jesus were truly man, shouldn't he have had a normal human conception – this makes it all too literal and a question of biology not theology! A biological anomaly then? No- rather what the doctrine points towards is the belief that Jesus is the one who has come from God and in whom we see God. God has taken the initiative here – it is God's work. He quotes the great protestant theologian Karl Barth, who said the doctrine upholds the divine initiative in the Incarnation.' In this Macquarrie points us to the working of the Holy Spirit' by the power of the Holy Spirit', an appropriate symbol to describe the divine initiative in it all! An initiative that in turn requires a human response in the shape and form of Mary's Yes! 'Let it be according to your Word! And in us invokes our response in faith as we recite our creed.

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