



Advent Course Talks 2009

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Session 3 – Thursday 17th December

Welcome

Prayer

Eternal God, you came to our world not in a blaze of publicity, surrounded by pomp and show, but quietly, unassumingly, almost unnoticed, in the quiet of the night in the little town of Bethlehem – born in a manger, to the Virgin Mary, your coming first witnessed by shepherds out working in the fields.

Time and again you have chosen the small, the humble, the seemingly insignificant, and have worked out your purposes through them. You have shown your strength in what the world counts weakness, you have made the last first, and the least the greatest.

Lord, teach us what that means today – that you can use us beyond our imagining, that you can take what seems unimportant and turn it into something wonderful, that you can work among us in ways that exceed our wildest expectations.

Teach us to see life not merely from our own perspective but from yours, and so may your strength be made perfect in our weakness.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Reading - Luke 1:26-38

Music - 'Magnificat from the Gloucester Service (Herbert Howells)

Talk

It's rather unfortunate that although the Virgin Birth (or rather, the Virginal Conception, as is more accurate) is one of the great doctrines of the Christian faith, we don't hear it talked about much these days. And I think it's due to the fact that over the years, there have tended to be some extreme responses to the doctrine. On the one hand, you get the skeptics who have sought to deny the literal truth of the Virginal Conception - we all no doubt remember the fiasco back in the 80s surrounding the then Bishop of Durham's denial of the literal truth of both this doctrine and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead; then you get your radical feminists who claim that the idea of a Virginal Conception is somehow offensive to women; and then, of course, there are those who simply say that in a scientific age, it's quite ridiculous to believe in the possibility of miracles like this occurring anyway. At the other extreme, there are many Christians over the ages who have tended to somewhat overdo the significance of Mary within Christian devotion to such an extent that she becomes almost a co-redeemer figure alongside her Son.

So it's not surprising that many Christian folk these days tend to shy away from talking about the role of Mary in the Bible and the Virginal Conception lest they be misunderstood. But I would want to re-assert the historical truth of the Virginal Conception and to highlight something of its significance. For a so-called 'scientific worldview' certainly does not rule out the possibility of the miraculous occurring, and there are indeed good reasons to accept the historical reliability of the Gospel witness to the unique manner in which Our Lord was conceived.

So firstly, the birth of Jesus marked a new beginning for humanity. When we look right back to the first chapter of Genesis, we read there that the Spirit of God moved over the waters of the earth to bring light to birth. And so at this new creation, the Holy Spirit moved in the womb of Mary to form the one who would be the light of the world. The conception of Jesus was a new Spirit-born creation, a new start for the human race. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was from the very outset the act of God and not simply the success



story of a good man. Jesus was not just a man who came to feel very close to God. He was not simply another religious teacher like Moses, or the Buddha, or Mohammed or Guru Nanak, but he was God himself, in the flesh and blood of a human being - fully God and fully man. And the fact that he was born of a virgin underlines this truth in an unmistakable way by ascribing his conception to the direct and unique action of the Holy Spirit. Christ is unique - he is the "Son of the Most High", the "Son of God" - and so the nature of his birth too is unique.

Secondly, the announcement of the birth of Christ to Mary tells us something about the way in which God calls people to share in his mission. For God did not choose someone of great wealth and status in order to enter our world, but rather a humble Jewish girl living somewhere on the fringes of the Roman Empire. We read that when the angel greeted Mary, she was "much perplexed by his words" and later it says that she asked the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" It's not that she doubted the existence of God and angels, but rather what she finds difficult to grasp is her own part in this amazing event. Mary is somewhat taken aback by the very suggestion that she was being called by God to play a key role in his plans for the world - why should she be the one entrusted with the task of bringing into being the longed-for Messiah? And even if God were to choose a very ordinary woman, she herself would have been an unlikely candidate, for she was unmarried, completely untutored in sexuality and she had probably not even given childbirth a moment's thought as yet. And yet, insignificant though she might have felt in the eyes of the world, Mary was nevertheless chosen by God. And so in the familiar words of the Magnificat, Mary could declare from her own experience that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." And so today, God continues to call ordinary Christians to do extraordinary things. It doesn't matter what stage of life we're at, God calls each of us to participate in his mission to the world. And just as Mary was empowered with the Holy Spirit to carry out the task to which she had been called, so the Lord will grant us the help of his Spirit in the tasks to which he has called us.

And thirdly, I think that Mary's final response to the angel tells us something about the nature of true faith - "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary says 'yes' to the Lord - she accepts the call of God to share in his redemptive work in the world and to allow his Son to be born in her by the power of the Holy Spirit. And furthermore, her response demonstrates something of the nature of true servanthood. For in accepting the call to be the mother of the Lord, Mary was effectively giving up her right to live independently of the call of God. There was no question of living her life according to her own rules or requirements. Rather from now on she would be living her life wholly in obedience to God's will. And let's remember that her calling did not end with her giving birth to Jesus, but being the Lord's servant was to change the whole course of her life. When Mary made her response to the angel, she would only dimly have been aware of what she was to experience over the years as she saw her Son grow into manhood, to die a cruel death upon a cross, and also to experience the joy of his resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. But that is what it means to be obedient to God's call - we simply don't know where it will lead.

And God calls us today to serve him. Yet his call is never tidy and predictable. When we seek to be obedient to God's will, who knows where he will lead us? For such obedience to God means nothing less than giving up our small ambitions and putting ourselves wholly at God's disposal. This is not a popular concept in the modern world, for we place great value on personal and moral independence - we set our own agendas for living and if a given morality does not suit our tastes, then we change it. But as Christians, we are called to be servants of the living God, to live our lives wholly in obedience to his will. This will often lead us, as it did Mary, through all kinds of suffering and trials, but through it all, God grants us the help of his Holy Spirit. We need to ask the Lord that he might fill each one of us with his grace so that in all things we may seek to do his holy and perfect will.

Discussion Time

- What does the doctrine of the Virginal Conception say to us about the nature of Jesus Christ? What significance does this have in a society in which there are many different faiths and ideologies?

Saint Paul's Church

Advent Study Course 2009



- What does the calling of Mary say to us about the way in which God chooses individuals to share in his mission to the world?
- In what particular way/s might God be calling you to share in his mission?
- The familiar words of the Magnificat (v46-55) are traditionally heard at every service of Evensong. But in what ways do they pose a challenge to our world today?
- What does it mean for us, individually, to be obedient to God's holy and perfect will?

Music - 'I the Lord of Sea and Sky'

Closing Prayer and the Grace

God our Redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.