

Beginning with a miracle  
Isaiah 7:10 – 17, Luke 1:26 - 38

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” This has to be one of the most amazing and perplexing statements made. No wonder Mary was confused and disturbed: “how can this happen?”

I haven't seen a movie yet that does justice to this but how could they expect to? This miraculous event can't be demonstrated because it happened mysteriously and inwardly. That makes it impossible to prove really. Yet this wonderful event and Jesus human birth are two of the most pivotal aspects of our Christian faith. Jesus is fully God. Jesus is fully human. These statements have a huge impact on our relationship with Jesus. Both aspects are vital to our faith.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary...

A guy called Owen Strachan puts it like this:

The virgin birth is not an odd blip in the history of the person and work of Jesus; it is a thunder-clap from heaven, God initiating his rescue plan. Salvation, the Lord is saying, is his work.<sup>1</sup>

If we don't believe in the virgin birth, does it matter? There has always been controversy over Jesus birth. Orthodox Christianity holds this to be true. But not everyone does.

The biggest question for me is that if Jesus was not conceived by the Holy Spirit; just when did he become God?

Was it when he was baptised  
or through his life of obedience  
or on the cross  
or did he only become God again when he was resurrected?

If we believe Jesus was God as well as human, we are in trouble if that wasn't for his whole life. The Arians believed that Jesus a creature subordinate to the Father; as such he could not be God. This was considered at the Church Council of Nicea in 325 when the first Nicene creed was formulated. It wasn't until the first Council at Constantinople in 381 that the matter was truly settled and the Nicene Creed was expanded to say this about Jesus:

I believe in .... one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. *From John's gospel*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2012/12/what-the-virgin-birth-means-why-rob-bell-is-so-tragically-wrong/> I don't agree with Owen's comments about Rob Bell btw. I don't believe Rob is saying that that virgin birth does not matter.

Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary... From Matthew and Luke

If we take a quick look at the Isaiah passage – the context is trusting God. Remember that Israel is a divided kingdom now into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Jerusalem is in Judah). Isaiah's ministry is to Judah.

If he can make Judah see that God is great and wise enough for them to obey him, they have hope. If not ... well. At this point of time Syria and Israel are attacking Judah. God tells Isaiah to pass on a message to King Ahaz – he needs to trust God even though these two nations plot against him. God says “Uh uh, it's not going to happen.” But there is a caveat – Ahaz must believe what God says.

And he doesn't. God even suggests Ahaz ask for a sign of confirmation. But he won't do that either.

So the Lord says “Well, I'll give you a sign far greater than you could ever have imagined asking.” God tries everything to get Ahaz to have faith so that Judah will be saved.

Prophecy often has two fulfilments – an initial and historical event. The first fulfilment seems to mean that by the time the predicted child is twelve he won't have to worry about the current threat from Israel and Syria but something much worse will happen. They will find out what their lack of trust in God results in – Assyria on the rampage!

The second fulfilment is described in Matthew 1:22-25,

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

We must be honest; the word for 'virgin' in Hebrew and Greek is ambiguous. There isn't time to go into this in detail but the word can mean 'virgin' or 'young woman of marriageable age'. However the Hebrew word has been translated as 'virgin' in this passage from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Various versions of the New Testament translate the word as virgin, young woman, bridesmaid. However it is important to note that in Scripture an unmarried young woman was always presumed to be chaste. Their society was nothing like ours in this regard.

Some people base their assertion that the virgin birth didn't happen on the fact that it is only described in Matthew and Luke. They say the fact that Mark doesn't mention it in his gospel, remembering that his gospel was the first one written, means that either it didn't happen or it isn't important. They also point to John's gospel to back up their theory. However John's gospel is different to the other three in almost every way. He begins his gospel with the eternal existence of the Word

with God – clearly he is asserting the divinity of Jesus – he just comes from a different angle.

Other people simply say that Mary lied. Obviously Matthew and Luke believed her or they wouldn't have recorded her story in the gospels. A further question is "Are the gospels themselves reliable?" Unfortunately we don't have time to go into that today. Suffice to say for now I believe there is more evidence for the authenticity of the gospels than there is for many other ancient documents.

The gospels differ from other historical documents of the time in that they are recount the personal experiences of many individuals from within the Christian community and of the stories and actions of Jesus himself. If you wanted to fake something you wouldn't choose a despised tax collector as Matthew was; nor would you choose a Gentile as Luke was. You would only choose Jewish authors if you wanted the Jewish people to believe the records.

We touched last week on the significance of Jesus being human. We said that Jesus name and the fact that it was a common name at the time, and still is in Spanish speaking countries, is very reassuring. Jesus became flesh and walked among us as one of us. He came into the neighbourhood; our neighbourhood. He understands everything we experience, everything about this world. He has experienced it first-hand. He knows our human condition and he loves us – he knows your human weaknesses and he loves us as our friend and brother.

We mustn't underestimate this. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

The virgin birth is the miracle that begins everything in Jesus' life and ministry. There is something very special; something heavenly about this child. He is fully human (born of Mary) but fully God (conceived by the Holy Spirit).

There is no other child like Jesus. He was sent by God the Father and conceived by God the Holy Spirit. This is another example of the Holy Trinity at work together to fulfil God's salvation plan.

If we don't believe in the miracle that commenced Jesus earthly life and ministry, why should we believe in the miracles he enacted during his life? Why should we believe in his miraculous resurrection? Why should we believe he wants to be with us and intervene in our lives today?