

## The Annunciation 2010

Last Christmas at the Service of Nine Lesson and Carols, it was a former midwife who read the Gospel of the Annunciation. I asked her afterwards how she would have reacted if one of her patients had come up with a story like Mary's? She said that she would have sent the patient to me.

So what do we make of this story? Is it something to enjoy only while we are in church and among our Christian friends? Would we be sceptical if we were told that something like this had happened in the real world? It is hard to believe in a virgin birth. Cynics would prefer to believe that there was some other much more earthly reason why Mary gave birth to a child who was not Joseph's. Or, more charitably, they might want to insist that the child was in fact Joseph's as well as Mary's.

But the miracle of the Virgin Birth is as nothing compared with the miracle of the Incarnation. Virgin birth or parthenogenesis is not so uncommon in the animal world. Many creatures normally produce young without mating and some animals, which ordinarily mate, can, in certain circumstances, give birth parthenogenetically. Apart from Mary, no human mother has ever been known to give birth to a baby without a human father, but it is not, in principle impossible, although, in fact, such a baby would have to be a daughter, because the Y chromosome, which makes a man, can only come from the father's side. A human virgin birth is not, however, inconceivable, if you will forgive the pun.

What is almost unbelievable is the Incarnation, the fact that Almighty God, Who made heaven and earth and sustains everything that there is, effectively became a human child.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,  
 Nor earth sustain;  
 Heaven and earth shall flee away  
 When he comes to reign:  
 In the bleak midwinter  
 A stable place sufficed  
 The Lord God Almighty,  
 Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels  
 May have gathered there,  
 Cherubim and seraphim  
 Thronged the air  
 But only his mother  
 In her maiden bliss  
 Worshipped the beloved  
 With a kiss.

*Certum est quia impossibile est*, said Tertullian, which means, *It is certain because it is impossible*. It is at the limits of our understanding that God is. It is almost unbelievable that God became man. If we can believe that He did, that the Word was made flesh, that He emptied Himself and took the form of a servant, and became obedient even to death on the cross, no other miracle is impossible. It is not incredible that He was born of a virgin and that He rose from the dead or that He healed the sick and walked on water, or even that He empowered His followers to work miracles too, if we can only believe that God is and that the Son of Mary is the Son of God.

What we are asked to believe, what we are invited to believe, is that God is so far intimate with His world. The eternal and spiritual permeate the temporal and material. Indeed it is the spiritual which sustains the material and the temporal exists within the eternal.

I do not say that miracles are common. In fact, the Birth of Jesus is unique. I do not expect that there will be any more human virgin births. I do not expect many miraculous healings or raisings of the dead or nature miracles, but I could not say either that they are impossible or that they never happen. It is not unreasonable to pray in faith for a miracle. It is unreasonable to demand one. These things are by the grace of God and are beyond our understanding.

I would say this, however. Mary encountered God in this world and so may we. I do not expect that any of us will ever see an angel, though it is not impossible and some of us might, but God is always with us and we ought to be ready to encounter Him. We should be ready to welcome Him.

The Incarnation teaches us that God is always present in our world. At the beginning of this sermon I asked you of the Annunciation, *Is it something to enjoy only while we are in church and among our Christian friends? Would we be sceptical if we were told that something like this had happened in the real world?* But I made a false distinction. There is no *real world* as opposed to the world of the spirit we encounter in Church. The Church is in the real world and, if we are Christians, we interpret the world outside the Church, the world of shopping and work and socialising, in the light of the eternal gospel. What is real is what is of God and what is farther from God can only be understood in terms of what is nearer to Him. We seek God in the world and He graciously reveals Himself to us. Sometimes, as with St Paul or the prophet Jonah, He makes Himself known to us when we are trying to get away from Him. But Jesus says, *Seek and ye shall find*. The more normal route to God is to seek Him. *For he that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him*.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a meeting of the Rochester Theological Society. The speaker explained that very few people outside the Church read the Bible at all, unless they leaf through the Gideon Bible when they are bored in a hotel bedroom. Even more shockingly, he said, most Christians seldom read the Bible and, when they do, they seek only comfort and guidance and the confirmation of their prejudices. They hardly read the Old Testament, except perhaps the odd favourite psalm, or indeed much of the New Testament. We have lost the sense that the Bible is transformative. We find the Bible off-putting and dull because we do not expect to encounter God in its pages. We don't expect to be challenged by Him, to wrestle with Him, to be transformed by Him. So we don't read the Bible and we don't recommend it to other people. Yet the Bible is God's written Word and bears witness to Jesus the Word made flesh. Nearly 2,000 years ago the Christian thinker Origen taught that, when we read the Bible, the Word of God is reaching out from its pages seeking us, just as we are seeking Jesus as we search the Scriptures. *The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing*

*asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

I think we could give similar reasons for the fact that non-Christians regard the Church as irrelevant and that many Christians hardly pray or ever take part in public worship. The same thing could probably be said of our approach to public worship, to prayer and to the Sacraments as can be said of our attitude to the Bible. We do not expect to meet God in Holy Communion or in prayer or in the fellowship of the Church. We don't expect to be challenged by God, to wrestle with Him, to be transformed by Him. So worship, prayer and Bible reading don't mean much to us and it isn't hard to give up on prayer, except when we are in trouble, to push our Bibles to one side when we are so very busy, and to stay away from public worship unless it pleases us or entertains us more than the other things we might be doing on a Sunday morning.

We don't expect to encounter God. We don't expect to be challenged by Him. We don't expect to be transformed by Him. But Mary did and was. If the story of the Incarnation is true for Mary, as we celebrate it today, then it is true for us also. God is there for us. He is in the world today. May our hearts be open to receive Him! If we encounter God, God will transform us. If we are transformed, other people will encounter God. Thus and only thus will the Church in this land recover and fulfil her vocation as the people of God. May our hearts be open to receive Him so that we may know His transforming power and fulfil our vocation as His people in this place!

Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.