

A Faith to Live By...

Sermons on the Apostles' Creed

4. "Conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary..."

My guess is that if there's any part of the creed that has people secretly crossing their fingers behind their back as they recite it, it's this part. Its semi-sexual overtones already make it ripe as a target for mockery, innuendo and ribald jesting. If, though, it has Christians velcroing rather than nailing their colours to the mast, I suspect there are two different sorts of problem needing to be addressed. First there are questions of one sort or another about credulity (could such a thing really have happened, and can we really take the claim seriously these days?), and second there are questions about its *meaning*. After all, if we can't see something as significant, as full of meaning, then we are unlikely to invest much energy in grappling with questions about its historicity. So, the two are linked together.

Those who drafted the creed factored it in prominently, as something to be insisted upon rather than indifferent about, suggesting that the circumstances of Jesus' birth were for them part and parcel of grasping the full force of what God had done in taking flesh and coming among us as one of us, in order to effect our salvation. Indeed, they choose to focus here, rather than, for instance, on Jesus' baptism, in narrating the series of redemptive events in Christ's life. So, we can't trip lightly over it and move quickly on.

Scriptural roots for the doctrine

The basis for this creedal claim, of course, lies in two particular passages in the New Testament section of our Bible. Those passages are Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1.26-38, each of which deals quite explicitly with the pregnancy of Mary, and insists that



it did *not* arise in the ordinary manner, Mary being still a virgin at the time of conception which was due to the 'overshadowing' of her womb by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35; Matthew's formulation (1:18) is more terse, but clearly indicates the same



thing). It may help at this point if we try and purge our mind's eye of the images of a thousand Christmas cards and the sentimentality and tinsel associated with the story, and clarify what is at stake in the claim. A young Palestinian girl in the northern town of Galilee is, we are told, already betrothed to be married to a local tradesman, Joseph; but before they are married, and while she is still a virgin, she

is discovered to be pregnant. Joseph presumes the obvious and considers a quiet termination of the agreement he has reached with her family, not wanting to 'expose her to public disgrace' (Mt. 1:19). When asked about the situation, Mary insists that she had a vision or visitation some months previously, where an angel told her that she would conceive and that this would be the result of the work of God's Spirit. Before Joseph can terminate the wedding contract he, too, has an angelic encounter in dream, in which the peculiar circumstances of Mary's pregnancy are confirmed to his satisfaction. So, he, at least, believes her, and together they ride whatever storm of scandal, shame and sneering arises from those who know that, whoever the father is, it's not Joseph, until the baby duly arrives.

That's the testimony of the two gospel passages. And it seems most likely that their source lies in the memory and testimony of Mary herself who, as Luke tells us, after the events surrounding Jesus' birth (which, again, we should probably strip of some of the familiar Christmas card imagery, suggestive as it sometimes is of a Hollywood style *son et lumiere* extravaganza which no one in the



vicinity of Bethlehem could possibly miss), stored up what had happened, and pondered it all in her heart. That doesn't mean that she yet grasped its significance, but she and Joseph will certainly have had a lot to wonder about over the coming years, and, by the time she came to tell her story, a lot more water had passed under the bridge and no doubt some of it was beginning to make better sense. The fact that only two of our four gospels contains any account of this story is sometimes cited as a reason for doubting its authenticity. But Matthew and Luke clearly know slightly different versions of the tradition, and their distinct versions of things corroborate rather than contradicting each other. Furthermore, while neither John nor Mark tell the story, they perhaps reflect awareness of it, and so testify indirectly to its currency in the apostolic church. So, for instance, the most reliable translation of Mark 6.3 has



the members of a local synagogue congregation asking 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?'. The whole family is known and each member is mentioned – with the exception of Joseph. Perhaps Joseph (who was probably significantly older than Mary) was by now already dead; but exclusion of reference to him as Jesus' father seems in any case likely here to be what historians refer to as a 'pregnant silence'.

John, meanwhile (6:41-6), records the crowds asking what seems like a question laden with dramatic irony. Jesus speaks of himself as 'the Bread of Life who has come down from heaven', to which the bystanders respond: 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know??'. The question invites the answer 'No!', though Jesus does not supply it. Instead he proceeds to talk at length about his Father, and to make it clear that the only one he knows as Father is God himself, from whom he has come.

In John 8:39-47, too, the question of paternity (that of the crowd and that of Jesus) is at issue, and again John records words from the crowd which are positively

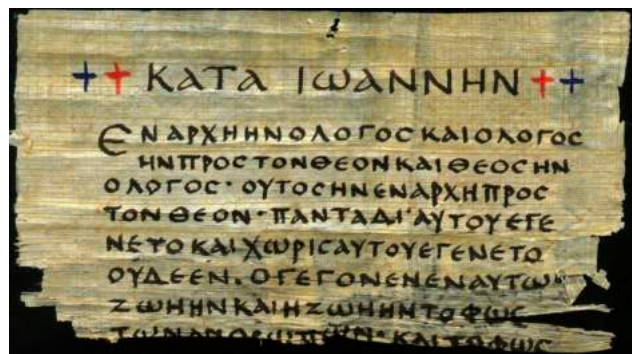


dripping with irony. When Jesus questions the crowds' faithfulness as 'children' of Abraham they respond: 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself'. The suggestion is, surely, that they are here turning some of Jesus' own words back on him with sarcasm added, and drawing inferences in doing so about the integrity of his lineage – namely, that he, the one who claims to have God himself as his father, is in human terms the illegitimate child of Mary. We know that in due course, there were indeed attempts to turn the circumstance of Jesus' birth into scandal, rumours growing up in Jewish circles that he was illegitimate, a

mamzer as the Palestinian slang had it, the product of a passionate clinch with a Roman soldier – an idea guaranteed to discredit Jesus – not just a bastard, but the bastard of a soldier of an occupying army. Hardly fit, then, for decent Jewish society, let alone to be taken seriously as a claimant to the role of messiah! John is clearly aware of rumblings along these lines, and of the background to them – Joseph was by now widely known not to have been Jesus' biological parent, but only his legal guardian.

Finally there is the witness of a tantalizing allusion in John's Prologue. The verses (Jn. 1:12-13) refer to those who believed in the incarnate Word, to whom 'he gave power to become the children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'.

Translated thus, the reference appears to be to that second 'birth' which, Jesus tells Nicodemus (3:3)



is 'from above', and not the result of any natural, let alone biological, process. Even

so, the ostentatiously drawn out description (1:13, 'born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man') seems highly likely to be alluding to that *other* birth which was 'from above', and without the involvement of blood, or the flesh, or the will of a man. That it was at least read in this way is clear from the existence of a fairly well attested variant reading of the verse in the Greek text, which substitutes a third person singular pronoun for the third person plural, and so makes Jesus rather than believers the subject of the second part of the sentence; viz, 'HE gave power to become the children of God, WHO WAS born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'. This may even be the original version of the text, in which case it constitutes an explicit reference by John to the tradition concerning the virginal conception. But even if it is a secondary mistranslation, it points to the fairly obvious parallelism between John's description here and the circumstances of virginal conception, and so to the evangelist's probable awareness of that tradition and its importance.

One further bit of New Testament evidence comes from Paul, whose writings are generally acknowledged to be among the earliest written sources. Again, it is a matter of vocabulary: in Romans 1:3, Galatians 4:4 and Philippians 2:7 Paul refers



explicitly to Jesus' lineage and birth. In each case, Paul uses the same Greek verb, *γίνεσθαι*. In each case, though, another Greek verb (*γεννᾶσθαι*) would ordinarily be the more obvious choice. But *γεννᾶσθαι* carries clear connotations of the involvement of a human father in the chain of physical descent which

leads to birth. *Γίνεσθαι* bears no such inference. So, it seems probable that Paul is deliberately, and somewhat awkwardly, avoiding the obvious word for these three respective contexts, and using instead a word that certainly does the job, but would ordinarily be nobody's choice, and that he is doing so carefully so as to avoid any suggestion that Jesus had a human father. That Jesus was indeed born (i.e. did not come down on the clouds or appear in puff of divine smoke) and so is known to be

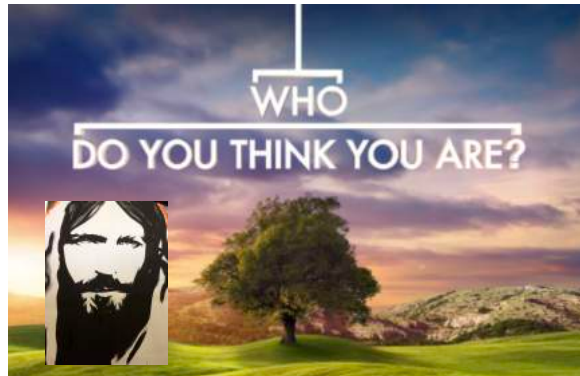
fully human is clearly equally vital to Paul; but that this was known to have been 'of a woman' and 'under the law' (Gal. 4:4) suffices to secure the fact of Jesus' solidarity with us. None of this demonstrates for sure that Paul *was* aware, early in the church's life, of the traditions about the peculiar circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth and parentage, but such awareness would account very well for what are otherwise oddly specific bits of phraseology and seems to be the most likely explanation.

None of this, of course, demonstrates or 'proves' that the virgin conception happened. But it does suggest that claims and questions regarding Jesus' parentage were almost certainly familiar to most of the New Testament writers and were clearly circulating in the wider church, rather than limited to a couple of isolated passages.

While we are still dealing with passages of Scripture we might as well turn to a couple of textual 'problems'

sometimes cited as casting doubt on the story of the virgin conception.

First there are the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3, which are both clearly concerned to trace Jesus' lineage back to theologically



significant ancestors. Matthew traces the line back to Abraham, and Luke to Adam, and in doing so both pass most significantly of all through David, the point being to establish that Jesus was 'of the line' of David, and hence in continuity with the pattern of messianic expectation. To do this, both Matthew and Luke trace the family tree back through the male line, and thus through Joseph. The question or 'problem' is posed as a Catch 22: either Joseph was Jesus' actual father, and hence the story of virginal conception is inauthentic, or he wasn't, in which case Jesus wasn't a 'son of David' at all, and the theological point of the genealogies is compromised. But Joseph was Jesus' legal father, and this was sufficient bond to secure the integrity of the genealogy; and, of course, he performed the *role* of Jesus' father in day-to-day

life, so that texts such as Luke 2:33 can refer to him perfectly naturally in such terms, without Luke feeling any apparent sense of contradiction with his earlier narration of the virginal conception. It is interesting to note that Matthew 13:55 affords a variant account of Mark 6:3, referring tacitly to Joseph as Jesus' father. Again, having told the story of Jesus' birth in chapter 1, it is unlikely that the evangelist intends now to contradict it here, the allusion being better understood, therefore, as to Joseph's 'paternal' role in the family or, more likely, his legal parentage of Jesus, thus underscoring again the descent from David which Matthew is certainly keen to draw attention to.

The other 'problematic' text sometimes cited is Isaiah 7:14 which, in older English translations reads: 'the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (*King James Version*). Aha!, some have suggested, *here* we have the source of the whole thing! An ancient prophecy which enthusiastic Christians have seized upon, inventing the story of Jesus' miraculous birth in order to show that he was indeed the fulfilment of the promise, and 'Immanuel'. But it doesn't work. More recent translations of the Hebrew text have long since corrected this to reflect the fact that the relevant Hebrew word simply means 'young girl'; and, while many young girls might also be virgins, Hebrew has its own perfectly good word for that biological condition, and it doesn't make any appearance here. Nor is there any evidence in pre-Christian Judaism of this text being interpreted to foretell a virginal conception. Nor is there any evidence of this text being read to refer to the Messiah. (Don't be misled by the seemingly momentous name 'Immanuel' ('God is with us'). Remember that *lots* of Hebrew children were given names that were 'significant' in the sense that they made statements about Israel's God or God's dealings with his people. Earlier in the same chapter (7:3) for instance, we learn that Isaiah's own son is called *Shear-Jashub* which means 'A remnant shall return'.) So, what we are dealing with in the KJV and elsewhere is actually a case of enthusiastic Christians reading back into this Old Testament text significances which are quite absent from it and doing so precisely because they believed (on quite other grounds) that the one who was 'Immanuel' *had in fact* been born of a virgin.

Questions of credulity

Let's turn, then, to wider questions about the credulity of the story of the virginal conception. And I suppose the case for the prosecution goes something like this: We are modern, sophisticated human beings, with an understanding of the world and its ways of working that is deeply informed by science. Surely to goodness we cannot and need not be expected to take seriously the claim that a woman was



impregnated and delivered of a child without the involvement at any point of a man? We know that such things don't happen, *cannot* happen, because we know all the biological processes that are required for the needful combination of chromosomes and what have you to arise in order for human life to be

generated. Of course, we can forgive those in the ancient world who *didn't* have this scientific account available to them, who thought that such an event *was* possible, and who told this story about Jesus's birth because they wanted to stress how important and special he was to them. Furthermore (it might be added), this story about Jesus isn't unique; it's quite similar to stories you can find elsewhere in the ancient world about special men (and they were typically men) whose births were alleged to have been out of the ordinary, and involved the special intervention of some spiritual being. Surely, it will be suggested, in the light of all this we can breathe a sigh of relief, uncross our fingers, and tippex out the offending words, or at least read them as 'merely poetic', and not making any claim, that would scandalize our sense of intellectual integrity?

Well, with the best will in the world I think we can and should dismiss this sort of objection, which, far from the enlightened and 'reasonable' attitude to the world to which it lays claim, is in reality both patronizing and dogmatic, and reaches its conclusion far too cheaply.

It is *dogmatic* because it trades on the assumption (widespread in our culture) that science has by now somehow got the whole world and its processes mapped in a determinative manner, having identified ‘laws’ of nature which cannot be breached and thus, by definition, excluding the possibility of anything happening which breaks the prescribed pattern, which virginal conception certainly does. But that seems to me (and I think most scientists would concur) to be a thin and inadequate understanding of how science works and what it is competent to pronounce upon with authority. Science has been and is remarkably successful in helping us to understand the regular processes and patterns of the cosmos and in doing so to understand all sorts of things the workings of which were once mysterious to us. But science (good science) is based on experience and is concerned precisely with



those regularities in our experience of the world that can be mapped and described. It can thus tell us with a high degree of certainty what is *probable* to have happened in some situation, and what is *likely* to happen in the future. And in doing that it helps us to handle the world and to live in and respond to it constructively, as a place with order and meaning, and a predictability that we can come to rely on. But, two things are worth observing. First, the best scientists know that despite the huge accomplishments of science in helping us to understand the world and its workings, the amount that remains yet to be understood massively outstrips what we currently know. The world remains laden with mystery. And, second, scientists (*qua* scientists) are only able to pronounce authoritatively on the *regularities* in the world's working – i.e., on the way things *ordinarily* happen (and so on what we might reasonably *expect* to have happened, or to happen in future, all other things being equal). Science cannot, *qua* science, pronounce on what is *possible*, past or future. It can only work with the maps of the world and the tools for measuring and registering it that are at its disposal. Of anything that will not fit or show up on those maps, or register on its instruments, it can say nothing more authoritative than that it is improbable or highly unlikely. To pronounce it ‘impossible’ would be a form of dogmatism to

which science as such is meant to be allergic, open-mindedness being of the essence of the scientific quest.

The objection is *patronizing* in its suggestion that the people of biblical times were credulous, primitive in their outlook on the world, and so capable of believing in such things as babies born to virgins. In reality, of course, they no more believed in such things than we do. As C. S. Lewis points out somewhere, they may not have been equipped with the technical vocabulary of spermatozoa, ovum, zygote and all the rest, but they knew full well from a wealth of experience that women do not



conceive unless they have taken a tumble with a man. Mary's question to the angel is precisely the question we find ourselves asking: told that she is to conceive and bear a son she asks 'How can this possibly be, since I'm still a virgin?' She doesn't need a biology text book. Furthermore, she knows exactly how her neighbours, family and friends are likely to respond when, as her belly swells in size and she is asked the inevitable question (who's the daddy?), she tells them: 'the Holy Spirit overshadowed me'. That's what they all say! Pull the other one, it's got bells on it!! And, in due course, as I

mentioned earlier, there were indeed attempts to turn the circumstance of Jesus' birth into scandal.

Whatever we make of all this, two things in particular are fairly clear. First, it seems fairly certain that Jesus was known *not* to be the biological son of Joseph, and the question of his paternity was a live one. And, second, first century Palestinians were no more credulous about the possibilities of conception occurring apart from the involvement at some stage of a man than we are. The claim that this was what had happened to Mary was precisely *not* an expression of a primitive view of things, therefore, but just as likely to be met with bemusement and disbelief then as it is now. The insistence that such things do not happen was the response of common sense *then*, just as it is now. And, of course, whether then or now it is part of the point of those events that we identify as 'miracle' in the gospels that they 'do not

happen' – viz, that they are a striking, scandalous departure from the patterns which common sense and science alike tend to concerns themselves with. That they are things that 'do not happen' is of their essence and definition.

What, then, about the supposed parallels in Greek and Roman religion? I think the best thing to say here is that, on close inspection, they turn out not to be proper parallels at all, but contain at best pale and inadequate resonances. If, for instance, we take the claims made about Augustus Caesar, that his mother was impregnated by the god Apollo, they are a million miles away both in tone and in substance from what Christians believe about Jesus' nativity. Here we have a demi-god (the son of Zeus and Leto) who comes to earth to have a brief fling with a human girl, leaving her with the consequences to deal with on her own. The processes of procreation are all intact; it's just that the male role is, as it were, supercharged, being performed by a male demi-god whose potency is hardly in doubt, even if he seems divinely unaware of the possibilities of contraception. Nothing could be further from all this than the Bible's depiction of what happens to Mary. Your womb, the angel tells her, will be overshadowed by the power of God, the same Spirit who hovered over the waters in the beginning, and out of its emptiness God will call forth a life. This is not impregnation by proxy; it's an act of creation directly parallel to the creation of the world, summoned forth out of emptiness, nothingness – Mary's virginal state, her empty womb, is (in and of itself) unable to bring forth life. But God creates life, turns Mary's emptiness into the site of a new creative act, fashioning for himself in her womb a human life which he will appropriate as his own, his own humanity, in which he will do all that needs to be done for the world's redemption.



For those who believe in the God who created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, the claim that this same God called forth life in the womb of a young Palestinian girl who had not yet had sexual intercourse with a man will hardly be a

stretch either of the imagination or the intellect. For those who believe that this same God, having created the world and populated it with human creatures, in the fullness of time purposed to enter the world as one of his own creatures, may well be disposed to take seriously the suggestion that the circumstances of his doing so were marked by something odd, exceptional, unique – an interruption of the pattern and potentialities of the ordinary no less remarkable than those attendant on his eventual departure from the world, virginal conception and resurrection standing, as it were, like two theologically charged bookends to the story of Jesus' life, ministry and passion.

From empty womb to empty tomb

But our disposition to take it seriously will be aided further if we can see this peculiar, messy, scandal-inducing event as more than a mere freak happening, more than an ostentatious, random show of divine power. It helps if we can see how this odd beginning to Jesus' life, to God's own life among us as a man, is charged with meaning, an appropriate sign pointing to what is actually happening here.

It may help first to dispense briefly with what I take to be two misunderstandings. First, it has sometimes been held that the virginal conception was necessary in order to interrupt the transmission of 'original sin' via the sexual act, and thereby secure Jesus' sinlessness. In a church which seems always to have been preoccupied with sex and its relationship to sin, it's easy to see how such an idea might have grown up. But there are absolutely no grounds for it in Scripture. Furthermore, the idea



fosters a very unhelpful notion of what Jesus' 'sinlessness' (an intrinsically difficult idea to unpack) consisted in. Whatever is meant by it, if we allow Scripture to be our guide it is something won through the struggle, sweat and tears of temptation, testing and obedience, and not courtesy of

some immunity established in advance by a sort of divine genetic engineering.

Second, the virginal conception is not the necessary condition for the incarnation. That is to say, Jesus did not have to have a human mother and God as his 'father' in order to be both human and divine. That's an odd idea which tends, in any case, to a peculiar account of the incarnation, as if Jesus were *half-man* and *half-God* ('he's got his mother's eyes, but his Father's way with sinners and tax-collectors...!'), rather than God present among us *as a human being*. God could, we may reasonably suppose, have 'taken flesh' and become a man through perfectly straightforward and ordinary biological circumstances, with a human father as well as a human mother involved. So, the question is why God chose *not* to do so, and what God might have been saying to or showing us by choosing to do otherwise.

The secret, I suggest, lies precisely in the parallel with creation that I mentioned a moment ago. What this event tells us if we ponder it in the light of the larger pattern



of Scripture is that here, in this particular birth as in no other before or since, God is making a fresh start, initiating a new impulse within humankind, regenerating our nature by taking it upon himself, in order

to become, as Paul has it, the first fruits of the new creation. The belief that the world's salvation will come and can only come courtesy of a radical new action of God the Creator, that it cannot develop or grow out of the potentialities, possibilities or potencies embedded in the way the world currently is, lies at the heart of Christian hope. That is the point of Jesus' resurrection from the dead: it testifies not so much to the possibility as to the *necessity* that if our world, marked as it is by corruption and decay, is to have a future with God, God himself must act to turn it around, bringing life – as only God can bring life – whether otherwise there is only death, emptiness, and nothingness. Jesus on the cross and in the tomb is the sign

under which our world currently exists, the symbol of its potency and potential, left to its own devices. The empty tomb which we shall celebrate in just a few weeks' time is the mark of God's promise not to allow it to end there, the pledge of God to make good his promise, to create and sustain new life where otherwise there would be none, life which is no mere replication of the life we know, but qualitatively new; life woven together with God's own life, to be enjoyed with God for ever. That the moment at which this new initiative, this decisive new stage in God's purposes and the fulfilment of his promises, begins should itself involve a unique act of new creation - filling emptiness, creating possibility where, biologically speaking, it is lacking - far from being a freak aberration designed to cause incredulity and embarrassment, might, looking back at it, actually be precisely the sort of thing we might expect.

