

THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

Luke 1:26-38

Last week Giles dealt with one of the two strands of Advent – the second coming of Christ. This week we're going to look at the other strand, the prelude to Christ's being born into the world just over 2,000 years ago. Although the first verse of our reading seems to start a new section of Luke's account, it's very clear that this new section is linked to Luke's previous account of the conception of John the Baptist. The two accounts complement and interpret each other. So as we study this passage together, please open your Bible's at page [***] or better follow all the relevant verses on the screen.

Look at verse 26:

“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,” (Luke 1:26 NIV)

The time reference links this closely to the earlier account of the conception of John the Baptist by Mary's close relation Elizabeth. Luke's not talking about the sixth month of the year here, but the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. This sixth month reference recalls verse 24, alerting us that Elizabeth has only now come out of seclusion. The geographical focus has shifted to the North, to Galilee, but the angel Gabriel holds the focus together. As we shall see in a moment, the angel Gabriel seems to have dealt very gently with Mary. Meeting the angel Gabriel was often intimidating – both Zechariah and Daniel were struck dumb by such an encounter. God has bypassed Jerusalem and even Judea, his saviour will be announced in Galilee.

Verse 27 has a double confirmation of Mary's status as a virgin:

“to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.” (Luke 1:27 NIV)

Catholics want to overemphasise the importance of Mary. Often Protestants react by ignoring her. Well, I hope studying our reading together today will give you a better sense of her real position. Verse 27 reminds us of the prophetic words of Isaiah in Isaiah 7:14, which

we'll return to later. God is again going to intervene in history to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah in Isaiah 7:10-17.

The initial the statement that Mary is a virgin fits with the statement that she is “pledged to be married” and prepares us for her later objections to Gabriel’s announcement that she is to be pregnant. In those days a pledge to be married, a betrothal, was a solemn and binding contract between the parties and their families and any waywardness by the bride would be taken very seriously.

In verse 28 Gabriel greets Mary and tells her that she is highly favoured:

“The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”” (Luke 1:28 NIV)

Nothing has prepared Mary for this angelic visitation or his exalted words telling of God’s favour. It’s no wonder that Mary is perplexed and silently questions the whole encounter in verse 29:

“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” (Luke 1:29 NIV)

But the words of favour are repeated in verse 30:

“But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.” (Luke 1:30 NIV)

So, God has given his favour to Mary, to one who had no claim to worthy status. God has raised her up from a position of lowliness, and has chosen her to have a central role in salvation history. This fulfils the angels opening words back in verse 28 “The Lord is with you”.

The angel then moves on to tell Mary how God’s favour is to be bestowed in verses 31-33:

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.”” (Luke 1:31-33 NIV)

What an earful for Mary. The flow of the angel’s presentation is telling: Mary will conceive, bear, and name the child who will be the

Son of God; God will give him the throne of David, and, as a consequence, the promised son will reign forever. How amazing for Mary to hear all that in just a couple of sentences. We see that the partnership of human and divine is essential if Jesus is to accomplish his mission. Here Luke introduces for the first time the idea of the universal authority of Christ, which is one of the favourite themes of his gospel. This isn't quite the same as the OT prophecies of the Messiah which envisaged the Messiah as an *adopted* "son of God" – now he's to be God's Son by *birth*. We don't really know why God chose to give Mary this great honour of bearing His Son, Christ. The scriptures don't suggest any special qualities or worthiness in Mary – indeed she was young, poor and born in a town of ill repute. All we know is that God DID choose her and she was obedient to His will.

As we've already said, Gabriel's words to Mary echo the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14 NIV). But we shouldn't see verses 31 to 33 *just* as a *fulfilment* of the prophecy of Isaiah – rather they are a *development* of it.

Here, Luke doesn't seem too interested in the meaning of the name "Jesus" – which means "Yahweh saves" – as the gospel of Matthew tells us (Matthew 1:21). Luke seems more interested in the role of God in giving the name and in the obedience of the parents. But, Luke does later give importance to the role of Jesus as saviour, for example at the end of chapter 1 (Luke 1:71, 74, 77) and in chapter 2 (Luke 2:11).

The connection of our verses 31-33 with the expectation of a restored kingdom of David is absolutely clear and indeed the connection of this with prophecy, such as (2 Samuel 7:11-16) – the Davidic covenant – and other scriptures, for example, Psalm 89, and Jeremiah 23:5-8 and many, many more is unmistakable. Luke returns to these themes towards the end of chapter 1 of his gospel (Luke 1:68-79).

These verses also unmistakably identify Jesus as the long promised Messiah.

So, Luke isn't envisioning the establishment of a new kingdom with human kings from the line of David ruling over it, which might have been the prevailing Jewish idea about the Messiah at this time. Rather Luke's seeing a single ruler from the line of David reigning forever. Perhaps he's following hints from Isaiah chapter 9 (Isaiah 9:7) and Daniel chapter 7 (Daniel 7:14). It's not a re-establishment of an earthly kingdom of Israel, but the establishment of the everlasting dominion of Yahweh.

Let's move on to look at verses 34-37:

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:34-37 NIV)

Again Mary's status as a virgin is confirmed by verse 34, where in the Greek, what she says means that 'she has had no sexual relations with any man'. As an aside here, I just want to say that I don't know why so many people find it difficult to accept the clear scriptural teaching of the virgin birth of Jesus. Given that God created the whole universe including humanity, it was surely a very small thing for him to organise a single virgin birth! This virgin birth shows the special, indeed unique, nature of Jesus and points up his nature as being both human and divine. Returning to our text, although Mary's role in the realization of God's salvific will is highly important, the initiative and powerful work of God are much more so. Ultimately, the purpose of Mary's question (v 34)—which leads to Gabriel's answer (v 35) and the giving of a sign (v 36) and word of reassurance (v 37)—is to emphasize that all of this is God's doing.

We can distinguish between Zechariah's request for a sign ("How can I be sure?" v18) and Mary's astonishment and her request for an

explanation (“How will this be?” v34). Mary has no doubt that the angel’s words can be realized, she just wants to know *how*. There’s no suggestion of sexual activity in our verses – just overwhelming divine power. This is nothing like the ancient Greek myths involving ‘so called’ virgin birth resulting from sexual intercourse between a god and a human woman. Indeed the words of verse 35 foreshadow the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles in Acts 1:8. They’re also a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 32:15 which anticipated the Spirit being poured out on people as a sign of God’s peace.

The consequence of this divine intervention is clear – Christ is the “Son of God” and yet to be born of a human woman, 100% human and yet 100% divine. That would later become of fundamental significance when Jesus gave his life on the cross. His divine nature meant that he was sinless and thus able to pay the penalty our sins deserved and at the same time his human nature meant that he was able to stand in our place and pay the penalty for those sins. Jesus’ role as the “Son of God” is not because he’s in the line of David, it’s because he was conceived in the power of the Holy Spirit. We’ve already discussed the issue of “what’s the importance of believing in the virgin birth of Jesus”. Well apart from what I said earlier, the virgin birth also shows us that salvation is from God and God alone – we can contribute nothing to it. I hope you can now better see the theological importance of the virgin birth and Christ’s nature as both human and divine.

Mary hasn’t requested a sign of the truth of the angel’s words, but in verse 36 she is given one. She receives what is for her new information; Elizabeth has just come out of seclusion (vv 24, 26, 36), so Mary could not have known of her pregnancy. The repetition of this information also serves to emphasize again the trustworthiness of Gabriel’s words and the heightened sense of the miraculous impacting the real world that’s in every part of this story.

In a way, Gabriel’s final words in verse 37 echo the comparable statement of the Lord to Sarah in Genesis 18:14: “Is anything impossible with God? – although they’re more applicable to

Elizabeth, who like Sarah, was old and barren, than to Mary. Note that scripture doesn't say "nothing is impossible *for* God", but "nothing is impossible *with* God". Actually I would prefer to render the multiple negativity of Gabriel's words to Mary in the positive, as – "everything is possible with God".

In the final verse of our reading, Mary's response contrasts sharply with that of Zechariah:

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her." (Luke 1:38 NIV)

She unreservedly embraces the purpose of God, without regard to its cost to her personally. If she had been convicted of adultery, she would have been subject to the death penalty (although this was not generally carried out by these times) and certainly her whole life would have been ruined. Her response is exemplary, demonstrating how all Israel, all the Jewish race ought, but manifestly failed, to respond to God's favour.

For Mary, partnership in the purpose of God transcends the claims of society and her husband. Here the word rendered "servant" might better be expressed as "slave-girl", so she is putting herself completely at God's service. In antiquity, the status of a slave was determined by the status of the household in which he served. In his characterization of Mary as "slave of the Lord," Luke has begun to undercut the worldly manoeuvring for status that was as common then as it is now. Mary, who seemed to measure low by any ranking—age, family heritage, gender, and so on—turns out to be the one favoured by God, the one who finds her status and identity in her obedience to God and participation in his salvific will.

May we all find the grace and strength to emulate Mary's shining example of unreserved service to our Lord no matter what the personal cost to us may be. She's a spiritual model for all of us who experience the birth of the saviour in our lives. Have you asked, "God, how can I experience the life of Jesus within me?"

In this season of advent, let us remember how Jesus, God's son, humbled himself to take on human form and be born to a lowly human woman on a particular day in history just over 2,000 years ago. Let's also remember that in an unimaginable expression of His grace God sent Jesus, and Jesus willingly went, to be our saviour, to die for us, and to be our Lord forever. This Christmastime let us ponder on the real meaning of the Christmas story full of awe and wonder. Let each of us ask the Father to make Jesus be born anew into our lives this Christmas. God's answer will be the same answer that was given to Mary – He'll come upon us in the power of the Holy Spirit planting new spiritual life within us.