

God's Coming Into The World – 2 The Virgin Birth.

Few things about the Lord's Coming into the world are more widely discussed, or more frequently questioned, than the assertion in the Gospels of His virgin birth.

Matthew, who tells the story from Joseph's point of view, speaks of Mary, who, though betrothed to Joseph, they had not yet come together, and she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. Luke describes the appearance of the angel to Mary telling her what was going to happen. He promised that she would conceive in her womb, and bring forth a son whose name would be Jesus. Mary asked as to how this could be since, and in her own words, "I know not a man". "And the angels answered and said unto her,

The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God." (Luke 1,38).

There has been, as I've said, fairly frequent questioning that this was so, and even within the Church itself there are those who see no reason to defend the Gospel statements. Though in Isaiah it was promised that a 'virgin' would conceive and bear a son, it is argued that nothing more specific than a young woman is what is meant. And there are stumbling-blocks such as in Matthew's Gospel where Joseph is referred to as Mary's husband and he is spoken of as contemplating divorce. Surely this suggests a total marriage relationship?

But in fact it doesn't. And it is important for us to be clear in our minds as to what was involved. For a start, we must not think of Jewish 'betrothal' as being at all like our modern-day 'engagement'. In the eyes of the peoples of those times betrothal was as binding as we regard marriage today. Throughout the period of betrothal a couple did not live together, though technically they were regarded as husband and wife and must go through the procedure of divorce if the betrothal were to be ended. These were, as I say, the customs and practices of the day. Hence, though they were not living together, Joseph is spoken of as Mary's husband, and why it was he began to contemplate divorce.

Mary was a virgin, and while still a virgin, she conceived in her womb a child who was not the son of Joseph. Joseph with whom, at that stage, she did not live together with. We strain our minds trying to contemplate how this could have happened. But it did. Some even talk of legends which have been drawn in and made use of in the Gospel record of the Nativity. And scholarly suggestions are put forward that the early followers of Christ so drew upon such legends to enhance the image of Christ and to

emphasise His supernatural powers and qualities. But this is not so. Simply because an event doesn't fall within the limits of our normal experience of life doesn't mean that it couldn't have happened. In this case it did. I repeat the point Mary was a virgin. The "Power of the Highest" overshadowed her and there was conceived in her womb a son whose name would be Jesus.

You may wonder at the certainty with which I say this. After all, there is so much doubt about it all and we are at present caught up in an era of heavy emphasis of the 'human-ness' of Christ, as a good man and an inspiring leader, but no more. Does it matter and can we really know?

I put it to you that in fact it matters a great deal and that the point at issue is an important one. If we make of Jesus the son of both Mary and Joseph He was no more than a mere man. The child born of finite parents cannot but himself be finite. And we are led to the conclusion (which some have reached) that He is to be classified along with such people as Moses, Muhammad and Mahatma Gandhi. These were good men and leaders of people, but nothing more.

But this was not what was promised of Christ. Old Testament prophecy doesn't speak of the coming of a gifted man in the person of the Messiah. Prophecy speaks of the coming of God Himself. As in Isaiah 7, verse 14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel" which of course, means "God with us".

Then, later on in Isaiah, chapter 25, verse 9: "It shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, He will save us; this is Jehovah; we have waited for Him, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation." Please note that. "It shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God... this is Jehovah".

Old Testament prophecy, then, speaks, not of the coming of a mortal man; not of the coming of a mere miracle worker, not of the coming of someone who would say some wonderful and unforgettable things; but the coming of God Himself into the world.

God chose to come into the world by birth of the virgin Mary. God needed a human body and natural mind within which He could for a time operate to throw back the forces of evil which, as I said in the previous talk, were then threatening to engulf mankind. God Himself descended into the world and 'put on' human nature that He might feel and combat the inclinations to evil which were then so heavily pressing upon people everywhere. But there was no human father involved. Mary was a virgin and she and Joseph had not at that time come together.

As I said earlier, we may well wonder how this could have happened. Mary herself did. What was it she said when the angel spoke to her? "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" "And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come

upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you." Divine Life Itself would descend and form the soul of the child which would develop within and be born of her.

And this point strikes at the heart of the difference between the conception and birth of the Lord and the conception and birth of every other person. Within every child conceived and born there is what is contributed by the father into which life from God can inflow. We are recipients of life flowing in from God.

Not so in the case of the Lord. He did not have a soul, as we have, which enables life from God to inflow into us. His Soul was the very Divine Life Itself, which, as I've said, descended into the womb of Mary and there was clothed with a human body. "There was" as has been said, "no need for a human father to provide a channel, as it were, for life from God to enter this world. It was the life of Jehovah God Himself that was within the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. (J.E.T. "The New Age", Dec. 74-Jan-75).

You may remember my quoting Swedenborg last week where he wrote that "Jehovah Himself descended and assumed the human in order to effect our redemption". (*True Christian Religion* 81). Divine Life which is God Himself was inmosty present within the Baby born of Mary. As to why God willed to be born of a virgin the answer is that this was the only way He could enter into the realm of human weaknesses and so overcome the spiritual forces which were then threatening to swamp over and destroy people everywhere.

As for Mary herself, no particular virtue attaches to her, though she must have been a good, trusting, young woman who had some love of religion. What in fact she did was to provide God with a natural body and a natural mind with which He could clothe Himself as a necessary means of effectively carrying out the work He knew must be done. She shared human weaknesses and inclinations to evil and was able, as was necessary, to pass them on to the Lord. For He had to know such weaknesses; feel inclinations to evil within Himself, and overcome them. Later Mary seems to have had a normal marriage with Joseph and children were born to them.

It is easy to dismiss thought and teaching about God, and Who He is, and what He has done for us, as abstruse and technical. Some even tell themselves that we can't know anyway. But this is wrong. As to who God is; as to who Christ was; and as to what He did for mankind at the time of His Coming into the world; this has the most profound implications for us and the most practical bearing on our lives.

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