

# MARY

## LUKE 1:26-38

Women in the Bible Series

### OPENING PRAYER

God, who brings to birth in us a love which proclaims your reign in the world, make us eager to seek that love in your holy Scriptures, and find in you the truth that sets us free. Amen

### EXEGESIS AND REFLECTION

It is hard to read this narrative without the backdrop of innumerable Christmas cards, somewhat oddly because this event must, presumably, have occurred about forty weeks before Jesus was born. Nonetheless, the images of young, wary, girls abound, accompanied by lilies and angels, or of pious women, kneeling at prayer in a manner more befitting a Christian than a Jew, angels and lilies again a feature.

It is also hard to read this narrative, during the post-Enlightenment period without some questions regarding the virginal conception of Jesus. This doctrine – the virgin birth – often being relegated to the ‘second order’ of Christian belief, and often associate too with a fear or repulsion of sex which in the twenty-first century is, at least in theory, not very prevalent.

Nonetheless, this narrative attempts to tell us a story of a miraculous birth in order to emphasise the importance of the child who will be born. This is not unusual either in the religious tradition of the Ancient Near East, nor of the Tanaka. Indeed, many biblical scholars seek to overcome the difficulty of the virgin birth by referring to the inter-textual use of Isaiah 7:14, and suggesting that the early Church misread the word traditionally translated ‘virgin’ in its precise sense rather than as simply a reference to a young woman. This may be the case, but it is undoubtedly also the case that Jesus’ conception and birth was meant to be regarded as miraculous. This narrative heightens the specialness of Jesus, as does the account in Matthew’s gospel. It is also the case that fairly early on in the church’s history, and in part because of St Paul’s injunctions against marriage, virginity is seen as a particular virtue, and the mother of Jesus to have been worthy of her calling was full of virtue. At the same time the whole business of sex and indeed bodiliness was regarded with some suspicion – a far cry from Jewish theologies. In turn, during the twentieth century, virginity as virtue came under suspicion, and the doctrine of the virgin birth became mired in controversy.

As a feminist theologian, I am fascinated by the way in which this doctrine has been embraced by some feminists, from Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century former slave who became a leading abolitionist and preacher, and who asserted women’s value because, ‘Man had nothing to do with it’ [the conception of Jesus], to contemporary feminists, some of whom, like Park Sung

Kyung suggest that the virgin birth is congruent with a vision of the Kingdom of God because the human male is excluded by it. I have a mendacious enjoyment of these understandings, but I have more sympathy with those who see virginity as a sign of single-mindedness, or of one who is not subject to another, not least of a woman who is not subject to patriarchy. Those who espouse these views, therefore, present the Mother of Jesus as a powerful figure who embraces God's call, who is perhaps a prophet and whose experience of conception is at least, if not only, an act of prophetic symbolism, as her life, and all human life, is joined, or re-joined to God's life.

I am also interested in a feminist reading of the Annunciation which sees it as a model or paradigm for the response of all disciples to the Way of Jesus. God calls each of us, shockingly, impossibly, to be bearers of God's Word, God's life. And, because it is a call, though it costs 'not less than everything', it is not coercion, and therefore Mary's yes to God is a precursor of the yes to God which God asks of each of us. According to some theologians, Catholic and Protestant, Mary is co-redemptrix, because without her 'yes', God's purposes would have been thwarted. And indeed, Mary does guarantee that Jesus was a flesh and blood human being. Whatever you make of those suggestions, her 'yes' certainly enabled God's purposes, as in some mysterious sense, so does ours.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Questions What do you make of the doctrine of the virgin birth?
- Why do you think it is important or unimportant? Is it appropriate to see Mary as a strong and mature woman – however young in years? How might such an idea enrich or diminish our understanding of God?
- 3. In what circumstances and places does God ask for your response of 'yes'?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Creator God, in whose love we are all called to participate, help us to look for the revelation of your will, and be willing to embrace your challenge, knowing that we are ever sustained by your steadfast love. In the name of the Blessed Trinity: Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Chung Hyun Kyung, 'Who is Mary for Today's Asian Women?' in *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1990)
- Miri Rueben, *Mother of God: a History of the Virgin Mary* (London, Penguin, 2010)