

'How shall this be?', Luke 1. 34. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 9 December 2009.

The set reading for this morning comes from the first chapter of Luke's gospel ...

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God, and behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David ... and of His kingdom there will be no end".

Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I do not know a man?"

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore ... the One to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. Indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible".¹

Our question for today is that of Mary, 'How shall this be ...?'

The angel Gabriel had waited a long time for this moment. It had been almost 600 years since he had been sent by God to the ancient royal court of Persia to speak to a great statesman, then supervising a third of the empire, by name Daniel, and to reveal the time of the Messiah's coming and subsequent rejection.² Gabriel's happy mission now was to declare that that time had arrived.

And so he sped, not now to some royal court, but to the home of Mary, a humble Jewish girl, in some insignificant village in the land of Galilee.

Quite understandably, when Gabriel first appeared to her, Mary was disturbed, yet, as we read, not so much by his presence as by his greeting; "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

But more and even greater wonders were to follow. For Gabriel proceeded to tell her four things; namely, (i) that she would conceive, (ii) that her child would be male, (iii) that His name was to be Jesus, and (iv) that He would be great and one day would commence a reign which would have no end.

Clearly Mary understood Gabriel to refer, not to an event following her forthcoming marriage to Joseph, the local carpenter, but to something which was to happen there and then. And she responded to the mind-shattering revelation with the words of our text, "How shall *this* be ...?" For, as she noted, "I do not know a man?" – 'I have had no sexual relations with any man'.

But I want you to note her exact words ... not, as we might expect, 'How *can* this be?',³ but 'How *shall* this be?'⁴

How different had been the response Gabriel had received six months previous from the ageing priest Zachariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist, after he had informed Zachariah that he and his wife were to have a son. Then Zachariah had come seriously unstuck by doubting the angel's word, and, in effect, requiring some miraculous sign in confirmation of what had been said. 'How shall I know this?', he demanded to know, 'for I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years'.⁵ Zachariah's objection had not gone down at all well with Gabriel, who responded indignantly, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings'.⁶

But in marked contrast ... with *her* question, 'How shall this be?' ... Mary was *not* challenging Gabriel's message, she was simply enquiring how it would be fulfilled.⁷ She was not seeking confirmation ... only information. And in the circumstances, hers was a perfectly reasonable question. Indeed, her very question, 'How *shall* this be?' was itself a declaration of her faith that it *would* be.

In response, Gabriel assured her that the Holy Spirit, together with God's overshadowing power and presence, would do everything necessary to enable her as a virgin to perform the role of a mother to the promised holy babe.⁸

And what profound and wondrous mysteries lie in the momentous event which Gabriel had come to announce ...

- when *God's* only begotten Son became *Mary's* firstborn son
- when the One who was immeasurably rich became abjectly poor
- when the One who was 'clothed in honour and majesty'⁹ was to be found wrapped in swaddling clothes.
- when He exchanged the worship of seraphim for the visit of shepherds
- when He exchanged sitting on the throne of the Lord of hosts for lying in an animals' feeding trough.

'Sitting on a throne', I say.

This coming Friday it will be 73 years to the day since Edward VIII, then King of England, renounced *his* throne that he might marry American divorcee Mrs Wallis Simpson. In the closing section of his autobiography "A King's Story", he described his departure from England. "And so it came to pass that at 2 o'clock on the morning of December 12 1936, HMS Fury slid silently and unescorted out of Portsmouth harbour. Watching the shore of England recede, I was swept by many emotions. It had been hard to give up the throne Of one thing I was certain: so far as I was concerned love had triumphed".

'It had been hard', Edward wrote, 'to give up the throne'. I don't doubt it – but I know someone who, out of love for me, gave up a far grander throne!

All this took place, we are told, during the reign of Caesar Augustus.¹⁰ Some five years earlier, the then Roman Roman Governor of Asia wrote to the cities in his province in connection with the celebration of Augustus' birthday. His letter spoke of Augustus as 'a saviour' and 'a god', of how 'the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings ('the gospel') residing in him'.¹¹

But unknown to Marcus Maximus, the Governor, and unknown to Augustus, ruling his empire from far off Rome, One was born at Bethlehem who *truly* was both 'God and Saviour'¹² and whose birth heralded a very real 'gospel'. For though it is true that, in a very real sense, in His birth the Lord Jesus did bring God to men – hence His name 'Emmanuel' – it was to be by His death that He brought men to God ... that He had come down from heaven to earth in order that we might each have the opportunity through faith in Him to go from earth to heaven.

At this time of year many will think of God's great love expressed in giving His Only-begotten Son for us. And in closing I want to leave you with some words which come from a letter that Linda and I received yesterday from Carlos Morris – who with his wife serves the Lord throughout the Spanish speaking world ... 'God's *giving* deserves our *thanksgiving*'. It does indeed.

Footnotes

¹ Luke 1. 26-37.

² Dan 9. 25-26.

³ Compare Nicodemus's question, in relation to the new-birth, "How can these things be?", John 3. 9.

⁴ The New King James Version goes seriously astray here with its rendering, 'How *can* this be, since I do not know a man?'

⁵ Luke 1. 18.

⁶ Luke 1. 19.

⁷ This is just one of many interesting comparisons and contrasts between John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus according to Luke 1 and 2:

<i>Item</i>	<i>John – Luke 1 ...</i>	<i>Jesus – Luke 1 ...</i>	<i>Jesus – Luke 2 ...</i>
Appearance of angel	11	26	
'Troubled'	12	29	
'Fear not'	13	30	
'Son ... name'	13	31	
'He shall be great'	15	32	
'How ...?'	18	34	
'Time be delivered'	57		6
'Brought forth ... son'	57		7 ('firstborn')
Circumcised	59		21
Spirit's action	67		25-27
'Light'	79		32
'Child grew, waxed strong in spirit'	80		40

⁸ There too lay the answer to a question posed some 2,000 years before by Bildad, 'How can he be pure who is born of a woman?' Job 25. 4.

⁹ Psa. 104. 1.

¹⁰ Luke 2. 1.

¹¹ This is the text of the letter from Paulus Fabius Maximus, Roman Governor of Asia, to the cities of Asia in 9 BC regarding the celebration of Augustus' birthday ... "Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a saviour – he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings (*euaggelion*), not only outdoing benefactors of the past, but also allowing no hope of greater benefactions in the future; and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings (*euaggelion*) residing in him. ... For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that New Year in all the cities should begin on 23rd September, the birthday of Augustus. ... and that the letter of the proconsul and the decree of Asia should be inscribed on a pillar white marble, which is to be placed in the sacred precinct of Rome and Augustus". Priene is just south of Ephesus; an engraving there reads, "The people to Athena of the city, and to the imperator (or the world conqueror) Caesar the son of god, the god Augustus".

¹² Titus 2. 13, literal translation.