The Coming King

Luke 1:26-38

Last Sunday we saw how God comes to a couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who weren't getting any younger: Elizabeth was probably going grey and Zechariah was probably struggling to bend down to put his socks on in the morning; God comes to this good couple who had suffered years of infertility and tells them that they are going to have a son, who will prepare the way for the Lord. But now Luke goes from that, which is amazing enough, to something even greater: the virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ.

And I suspect that Theophilus, who Luke writes this gospel to, was waiting to hear about this. Because Theophilus was probably a member of the educated Roman elite. And he's heard about Jesus and he's heard about the virgin birth and he's thinking, is this true? I mean, was Jesus really born of a virgin? Because if I'm going to stick my head above the parapet here, if I'm going to face the cost of coming out as a disciple of Jesus, if I'm going to start saying Jesus is Lord rather than Caesar is Lord, I want to know this is true. I don't want to loose my job or my life for fairy tales. And doctor Luke, who's no fool and knows how babies are made, reports back to Theophilus, 'this is true, I've gone to the eyewitnesses', which means he's almost certainly spoken to Mary, and this happened.

Weak Things

To a Jew, the announcement of John the Baptist's coming could not have been better. John's father, Zechariah, was a priest, his mother was the daughter of a priest and the angel brings the message to Zechariah in the Holy Place, inside the Temple of God, the very epi-centre of Jewish worship, in Jerusalem the holy city, at the time of evening prayer. This was perfect timing, perfect setting, perfect cast.

But if God goes high for the birth of John the Baptist, for the announcement of the coming of His own Son He goes very low. And this time Gabriel comes to Mary, who's just a peasant girl, betrothed in marriage to Joseph, who's a carpenter, a manual labourer. And it doesn't happen in Jerusalem, it happens in a nowhere place called Nazareth. Luke even has to spell out for Theophilus where Nazareth is – it's in Galiliee- because Theophilus had probably never heard of it, this wasn't exactly on the discerning man's list of top tourist destinations. This last week we went walking in Zermatt. And with standing-room only on the train it seems like everyone wants to go to Zermatt. Well, no-one wanted to go to Nazareth. There was no express donkey shuttle between Jerusalem and Nazareth. And when Nathanael, one of Jesus' disciples is first introduced to him, and gets told by Philip that Jesus comes from Nazareth, he scoffs and goes, 'Nazareth, can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

Now you and I, we have every reason to humble ourselves before God. But here is God, the only person who doesn't need to humble himself, the eternal God of infinite beauty and majesty and perfection, humbling Himself for us, and choosing to be conceived in the womb of a girl who, at least in the eyes of someone of Theophilus' standing – was a nobody living a nowhere kind of place.

Why does God do that? Why does God ordain that His Son is going to be born in such a poor, grimy, backwoods setting? The answer is that He is bringing about his plan of salvation without any reference to the things that matter to human pride, without any reference to the high and mighty. God has no need of the celebrity, film-star endorsement. In fact the gospel is a reversal of all that stuff.

And God uses weak things, women like Mary, men like Joseph, towns like Nazareth, people like us, to work out his purposes in the world. When speaking to the Christians at Corinth Paul (1 Cor 1:26-30) says this 'Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.'

And in coming to Mary, God signals to every one of us, it doesn't matter what you are, it doesn't matter how many degrees you do or don't have. By themselves your gifts and abilities are not what makes you useful in His sight. Last week it was an older couple. This week it's a young girl from the backside of nowhere. And some of you may compare yourselves unfavourably to others: I'm not as bright, or as quick, or as sorted as so and so, and some of you may allow pride a foothold and think you compare pretty favourably to others, but those aren't the questions God is asking.

And the supreme demonstration that God uses the weak things of the world to accomplish His plan, is the cross of Christ. And in that same passage in 1 Corinthians Paul says that whilst Greeks want wisdom- they're the kind of people who want intellectualism and philosophy, and Jews want signs – they want miracles, give me proof, God sets forth the foolishness of the cross: the bleeding dying, crucified man: (1 Cor 1:24-25): 'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God [that's the cross] is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'

From His conception through to His death, Jesus overturns our human pride on the one hand, and on the other he tells us that everyone of us, regardless of where we are starting from, if we will humble ourselves and put our trust in Him and not in ourselves or our abilities or lack of them then we can first be saved and then be useful in His Kingdom.

Mary receiver of grace

In v28 the angel Gabriel greets Mary and says 'Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.' But then Luke goes on to record Mary's response: v29 'But she was greatly troubled at the saying.' She wasn't just troubled by the angel's appearing to her out of the blue, though that was reason enough to be troubled, what unsettles her more than that is what he says. Now, why is that? What's so troubling about 'Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.' Well, Mary is troubled, she's deeply, seriously perplexed by grace. She's struggling with grace, because this greeting oozes grace. The angel's opening word, here translated

'Greetings!' Comes from the word 'grace', and when he calls Mary 'O favoured one' Gabriel's actual words could be translated 'you who have received grace'. So here is Mary, a young girl who has probably never experienced grace in her life, who has had to work hard for whatever living her and her parents could scrape together, who's only experience of religion has been that of Jewish legalism, and trying to impress God by how well you keep the rules, and an angel appears to her and says: 'Grace Mary, you have received grace. The Lord is with you!'

And like Mary, don't you find yourself stumbling over grace sometimes, and what that means for your life? There is something inside us that wants to earn forgiveness and earn acceptance in the sight of God and we struggle to come to God knowing that we can bring nothing with us that will impress Him, and our work is simply to trust Him for what He has done for us in Jesus. And aren't there times when we resent it when grace gets shown to others who we don't think are worthy, just as the elder brother resented the father's grace towards to the prodigal son?

And Mary, this young teenage girl, struggles to get her brain around grace: that God has been gracious to her, and picked her out and chosen her for His purposes, and blessed her in a way she could never fully comprehend, and not because she has earned it, or worked for it or said enough prayers or offered enough sacrifices, but because God pours out grace and mercy into the lives of those who don't deserve it. And the gospel is not just that God chooses the weak things, He also chooses the unworthy things. Men and women like us who don't deserve His mercy, yet whom He reaches down and draws to Himself in His love.

And if sometimes we struggle over the grace of God, maybe you also struggle over the call of God, over the call of the gospel. Because here the angel says to Mary 'The Lord is with you' and that troubles her. 'What does it mean, the Lord is with me?' And maybe you know that God is on your case, maybe you hear Him calling you, you feel Him drawing you to Himself, you sense this pulling attraction to Christ but you're trying to keep Him at arms length, you're not sure the news that God is with you is such good news, with the gospel's call to repentance and commitment, its call to serve others and live for Christ and not yourself. And it's all getting a bit too close for comfort. Is 'the Lord is with you' good news?

Well, listen to how the angel responds to Mary's fear, v30 'And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."' Once again, the angel says: Mary, it's grace, don't be afraid, God wants to do you good. God's call on your life, God's grace in your life, is not something to hold at arms length, it's not something to fear, it's something to happily, gratefully receive and surrender to.

Those of you from a Roman Catholic background will know that the Roman Catholic church teaches that Mary is the dispenser of grace. But that's not what Luke says here. She is a recipient, a receiver of grace. And whilst the Roman Catholic church pays Mary way too much adoration, bordering on worship, yet this young girl was seriously favoured. She was chosen by God out of hundreds

and thousands to bear His son. But not because she had earnt it, or deserved it, but because of God's grace to her. And you will never be chosen to bear His son, but never the less God calls you and has called you to know His son. His grace is as much toward you as it was towards Mary.

Now how can that be? How can God be so gracious to people like us who don't deserve it? The answer is because of His son who was coming.

The Coming King

And Gabriel spells out to Mary that she is going to conceive a son and in v31 he says 'you shall call his name Jesus.' Now, parents, I don't know why you chose the names you did for your children but we gave one of our daughters a middle name which means to stand strong and not give in, to be faithful in the fight, to swim against the tide. And there have been times since when I've wished we had given her a name that meant something more like I'll-do-what-dad-says-the moment-he-says-it, rather than I'll stand strong in the fight!

Well, this boy that Mary is to bear, he's not called Jesus by chance. That name means 'The Lord is Salvation'. And Jesus' very name tells us why He came, to save. And in v32 Gabriel says 'he will be great' and whilst there have been many great men and women before and since Jesus, no-one has shaped the course of history like the boy born to this young peasant girl. Gabriel says he 'will be called the Son of the Most High.' In Luke 1:76 Zechariah, John the Baptist's dad, says that John, his son, will be called 'the prophet of the Most High' and that is honour enough. But the boy that Mary will bear is going to be the Son of the Most High.

And He's going to be a King: v32-33, 'And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Now just try and get your brain round that. Because not so long ago the British Empire stretched around the globe and we so nearly succeeded in civilizing all of you lot and turning everyone into Brits, but now it's gone. And here is Mary, an unknown girl, in an unknown town, being told that unlike every other empire the world has ever known – Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, British, American, unlike every empire that rises and falls, His empire, His kingdom, will never end.

And whilst Gabriel's emphasis here is on Israel, that Jesus is the promised coming King, coming in the line of Israel's great king David, the fact that this story is being recounted by Luke, a gentile, to Theophilus, another gentile, tells us that God's plan goes further than the borders of Israel, it extends even to us. And this boy Mary was to bear Gabriel says is going to be the greatest ruler not just Israel, but the world, has ever seen.

But Mary's still trying to play catch up, and she asks in v34, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'

And in reply Gabriel says in v35, how's it going to happen? 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.'

'Mary, this conception is not going to take place in the normal way, this isn't going to be you and Joseph. The Holy Spirit is going to conceive this boy in your womb and as a result and He will be holy'. Now, you and I could never make such a claim about ourselves – to be holy. You know you have this sin factory inside yourself, and you don't have to be a parent for many days before you realize that your beautiful sweet, innocent looking baby isn't holy either. Every one of us comes into the world with this inbuilt bent toward sin, toward having our own way. But not Jesus. Fully human yes, but with a sinful nature? No. This boy is going to be holy, and unlike every other man, woman or child, He won't need rescuing and saving from His own sin. Instead, because He is holy He can become the means to our rescue. Gabriel doesn't spell that out to Mary, perhaps that would be too much to bear so soon, but as the apostle Paul says in 2 Cor 5:21 at the cross 'for our sake, he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin [who was holy], so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

And so the Holy Spirit conception and virgin birth of Jesus, isn't some side serving on the doctrine table. It's not something we can say 'well, I think I'll take a rain check on that.' You and I, we need a saviour. We need someone to rescue us, to stand in our place. We need someone to take the punishment, the wrath of God for our sins. But that person if he is to stand in our place, he must be holy, he can't be tainted by sin himself. Where can we find a saviour like that? Well Gabriel says Mary, your boy, who's name means 'the Lord is salvation' this coming king, is going to be holy, He is going to be just such a saviour. And that is why God can be gracious to men and women like us, because Jesus makes it possible.

Now is any of this possible? Is it really possible that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of Mary whilst she was still a virgin, or is this just make-believe and the stuff of fairy tales? And maybe like Theophilus, you read this and think 'is that really true? Did this really happen?'

Well, Gabriel answers your question in v37: 'For nothing will be impossible with God.' And if you don't believe God can do this, then you have too small a view of God, and I would question whether such a god was worth worshipping. But if you have a view of God that sits out at night and sees the stars and the sheer grand scale of the universe or that looks at the majesty of the mountains or the detail in the tiniest flower, and considers that all that you see is the work of His fingers, then you realize that nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible for Him.

As Bishop JC Ryle said "Faith never rests so calmly and peacefully as when it lays its head on the pillow of God's omnipotence." And you and I may have a thousand questions, or you may face a multitude of issues in your life, but the Bible's reassurance to us is the same as Gabriel's to Mary: 'Nothing will be impossible with God'.

Now, how do you respond to that? How do you respond to grace? How do you respond when God challenges you and calls you to something higher, as He calls Mary here to be a part of His salvation plan? How do you respond when the call

to follow Jesus and obey Him comes at a cost? Well Mary faced just such a challenge.

Embracing the Cost:
And Mary's initial response to the news that she's going to have a son is in v34: 'And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"' Now, how come Mary gets away with that question when last week we saw Zechariah struck dumb for 9 months because he asked the same angel 'How shall I know this?' Is Gabriel just being soft on Mary because she's a girl and he played hard-ball with Zechariah because he's a man?

And the answer's 'no'. Zechariah's question, his 'how?' was a how of unbelief. He was asking for a sign. He was saying 'like, sure my wife's going to have a baby when we're old! Give me a sign to prove it.' And he got his sign, by being struck dumb and was rebuked for his unbelief. But Mary's question is altogether different. Her 'how' is a how of faith. And she may just be a teenage girl, but she hears the promise of God and she says literally, 'how will this be, because I don't know a man?'. Gabriel, I don't sleep around, Joseph and I aren't having sex, we're only engaged, so if you're going to do this, how are you going to do it?'

Her how was a how of faith. She took God at His word. She sees the seeming impossibility of what He is asking, and yet she believes and she wants to know how God is going to do it. And God may call you to do something out of your comfort zone. That may be as simple as talking to a neighbour, or being reconciled to a family member, or taking on some area of service, or laying down some activity. Or he may take you through circumstances that are way out of your comfort zone. And if He does, it's ok to ask the how's and why's but as you ask them, let this teenage girl be your example and respond with faith; and trust Him that He knows what He's doing.

And when Gabriel has explained to Mary how God is going to take care of all the circumstances she responds in v38 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word.' Now Mary was betrothed to Joseph. That was a legally binding agreement to marry. The only way out was by divorce or death. If she was found to be pregnant outside of marriage her future was grim. At best Joseph might divorce her, at worst her community might stone her. Either way, things didn't look good. Mary's response? I'll do it. God if you want me to do this, I'm in. Regardless of the cost, regardless of the loss of reputation, I'm your servant, let it be to me according to your word.

Do you know, I think sometimes we –and I mean me in that- we are so soft. We will follow Jesus and serve Him all the time the cost is low. But when it begins to require something of us: when Christ makes demands on our money, or our leisure time, or our comfort, we squirm.

Church I pray that Mary, this young, simple, poor girl, a nobody, from nowhere would shake and challenge us in all our sophistication. She listens to God's word, she believes it, she willingly humbles herself under it and she embraces the cost of it. What a girl! Let's follow her example.