

revolutionary virgin
a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday in advent
24 December 2017
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by *father ken hewlett*

the lections: 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Song of Mary; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

In the gospel reading today we have heard about Mary being told what was about to happen in her life. We are all familiar with the titles Mary has as mother of Jesus and the intellectual challenge it is for many of us to work through the concept of her virginity. This morning I want to suggest another way of thinking about Mary – to invite us all to consider Mary as a revolutionary virgin.

The White Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is famous for her habit of believing six impossible things before breakfast. In Luke's nativity narrative Elizabeth seems equally skilled in this art-believing so easily; and she accepts that her relative Mary was to be a virgin and a mother. We all, after all, know how babies are made and gave up all ideas about storks or gooseberry bushes many years ago. We know that it takes the interaction between a sperm and an egg to bring a foetus into being, and to suggest otherwise is to fly in the face of scientific fact.

It did however, take us human beings a surprisingly long time to work out this basic biology. Greek philosophers thought quite differently. They believed the man supplied the vital spark for the new life while the woman's womb worked merely as an incubator. Their image was of a sower sowing seed in a fertile field. The man was the active partner, his seed contained the whole potential of new life, while the woman was the passive receptacle in which this new life developed and grew. They also believed, by the way, that female children resulted from some inadequacy in the womb – an environment too cold or too weak to allow a male child to develop. Hence, the Aristotelian definition of women as misbegotten males. In short: life came from men, women merely provided a more or less adequate environment to nourish it.

It is against this pre-scientific background that the doctrine of the virgin birth needs to be understood – it gives a revolutionary centrality to the woman's role in reproduction. Mary the virgin mother is as revolutionary in her body as Mary the poet is in her Magnificat, the 'Song of Mary'. Remember that women in first century Palestine were not usually independent people; they passed from the care and control of their fathers to the care and control of their husbands. To be a respectable woman was to be under the wing of some man, which is why the plight of widows is mentioned so often in the Bible along with that of orphans. To lose the male head of the household is to be in a vulnerable position in any patriarchal society.

The relevance of the existing social system is critical to our better understanding of the virgin birth. In Mary we have a girl who is in a position of transition. She is betrothed – and so has begun the journey away from her father's control.

She is not yet married, still a virgin, and so is not yet under Joseph's control. It is at this point of fluidity and ambiguity in her social position that Mary is invited to become the mother of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. And it is at this point that she is able to answer for herself in a unique way. No longer defined just as 'daughter', not yet defined just as 'wife', so Mary is free to answer for herself. Her 'Let it be to me according to your will' is an assertion of her right to decide for herself, as well as a trusting response to the invitation of God.

This is the importance of the doctrine of the virgin birth – not that it exalts virginity over sexual activity but that it allows Mary the space to respond for herself. We are then on the road to seeing the virginity of Mary, not as a biological reality, but as a relational reality. Then we will come to see in Mary's virginity a radical freedom from the ties of patriarchy. This, in turn means that we can begin to see Jesus' birth as being free from the unjust power relationships that characterise patriarchy.

The truth that the virgin birth is teaching us is that the conception of Jesus is the beginning of a new order: the order of the Magnificat, the 'Song of Mary' rather than the order of the status quo. A new order that begins with a socially insignificant woman saying yes to God, without consulting with father or husband. A new order in which the powerful are brought down, the lowly are exalted, the hungry are filled and the rich sent away empty.

Our annual celebration of the birth of the new order in celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ is an appropriate and timely reminder for all Christian people that what we are celebrating the demands of each and every one of us who call ourselves Christians to live in the new order and not in the comfort of the old. Living in the new order requires us to care for each other and to show our concern in both words and deeds for all people regardless of race, gender, culture or status. If we can achieve this or even aspire to this we will indeed be able to know that Love is born at Christmas time.