

# Maroondah Uniting Churches

## Advent study 4

Rev Dr Peter Mallen

### Introduction

In our day, possibilities concerning human reproduction are both more widely available and more controversial than at any time in history. Without going into the ethics involved in any particular treatment, there are the well-established means of *suppressing* reproduction such as using the pill (including the more controversial 'morning after' or emergency contraception pill), as well as the politically and religiously divisive option of abortion. On the other side there are various techniques to *assist* infertile or same gender couples to conceive a child, of which in vitro fertilisation (IVF) is perhaps the best known option.

In biblical times, knowledge of human reproduction was less well understood and any problems conceiving were usually unfairly attributed to the woman who was often labelled as 'barren' (e.g. Sarah, Hannah), which was considered socially shameful. Opening a barren woman's womb was considered a divine gift that then allowed normal human reproduction between a man and a woman to occur. In Greek mythology there were numerous tales of more direct sexual encounters between the gods and humans that resulted in the birth of human offspring having special abilities (e.g. Zeus sired heroes such as Perseus and Heracles).

However, there is no biblical or pagan story that matches the birth story of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Given the likely embarrassment this story caused the early Christian community, it suggests it was widely known and accepted.

### Opening the Scriptures

We read from the Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV) ...

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

## Thinking about Mary and her role

Look at these images of Mary and note any differences between the age, appearance and attire that Mary is wearing. What else can you see in each image? Which of the images resonates more strongly with your personal image of Mary and why?



For Protestant Christians, Mary is an important figure in Luke's Christmas story as she gives birth to Jesus but is often then forgotten other than brief mentions when Jesus visits Nazareth (Mark 6:1-3), at the cross (John 19:25-27) and early in Acts (Acts 1:14). In Catholic and Orthodox traditions, however, Mary has a much more significant and ongoing role.

In Orthodox tradition, Mary is *theotokos* (literally Godbearer or Mother of God). She is the most revered of saints because she was the place where God came to dwell and was thus a living temple for God for nine months. She is the one who allowed God to be present in human form. In many *theotokos* icons (as above), Mary points the way to Jesus. In other icons she is seen holding Jesus in her lap, presenting him to the world for worship. When Mary prays she turns to her son, who is God incarnate.

In Catholic tradition, Mary is regarded as the most blessed or immaculate Virgin Mary. She was and remains a virgin even after the birth of Jesus, who is her only son. She herself is regarded as being immaculately conceived and is thus free of sin. Hence she is often seen dressed in white. At the end of her life Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven, where she reigns as 'queen' of heaven and earth, given her close relationship to her son who rules as King of kings. For this reason, Catholics are encouraged to pray to Mary who intercedes with her son on behalf of humanity.

### Exploring the Bible passage

Mary is introduced to the story as a virgin (*parthenon* in Greek), a marital status which is reinforced later in the passage as she asks the angel Gabriel how she can conceive a child as she has not known a man (v34). She is, however, in the midst of Jewish marriage customs, as she is engaged to be married to Joseph (v27).

- How old is Mary likely to have been?
- In the preceding story (Luke 1:5-25) Zechariah has significant status as a priest who serves in the temple at Jerusalem. How does Mary's social situation compare with Zechariah, given her gender and her geographical location in Nazareth (v26)?
- How does God's choice of Mary fit in with the rest of Luke's Gospel?
- In the later Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed, Jesus is described as 'born of the Virgin Mary' and 'incarnate of the Virgin Mary'. Why was her status as a virgin considered so vital in the early church? What does it emphasise? What is at risk for our faith if we walk away from this understanding?

Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah reduces him to fear and trembling (Luke 1:12), which is a fairly typical human response to encountering an angel according to Scripture. But here Mary is not afraid when greeted by Gabriel but rather is puzzled or perplexed (v29).

- What might puzzle Mary about Gabriel's unexpected appearance and greeting?
- Why might Mary have found favour with God (v30)? By the end of the conversation would she still have considered herself favoured? Why or why not (see Luke 1:47)?

Gabriel cuts to the chase. Mary will conceive and bear a son who will be considered great, who will be called Son of the Most High, who will rule on David's throne and whose kingdom will know no end (vv.31-33). If Mary knew her Scriptures, this description fits that of the anticipated Davidic Messiah (see 2 Samuel 7:8-16, Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 9:6-7).

- Do you think that Mary is impressed or intimidated by this promise? What seems to be more occupying her mind (v34)? How does she remain so focused and down to earth?
- In Gabriel's previous encounter with Zechariah, he also questions how things can happen as predicted and is struck dumb for daring to question the angel. In what way is Mary's questioning different to that of Zechariah, such that it draws out further explanation rather than punishment?
- Is Mary's question more along the lines of needing to speed up her marriage plans with Joseph so that this son can be conceived sooner?

Gabriel now explains *how* Mary will conceive and how this will be so different to what she probably imagined earlier in the conversation (v35). Her child will be conceived by the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit coming upon her. The inference is clear – if still mysterious and astounding – God is clearly the Father of Jesus, who is named as Son of God.

- In Luke's mind, Joseph is not to be regarded as the father of Jesus (see Luke 3:23). Do you think Gabriel's words are some of the things Mary treasured in her heart (Luke 2:19)? Do you think she ever explained any of this to Jesus? (... and who was Luke's likely source for this story ...?)
- Does the deep spiritual and innate connection with God as his Father help explain statements that Jesus makes elsewhere (e.g. John 5:19-20, 14:8-10)?

Gabriel backs up the authenticity and dependability of his message by reference to Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy (v36), which Mary soon checks out for herself (Luke 1:39-40). The statement that nothing is impossible with God (v37) may well be an allusion to Genesis 18:14 when the angelic visitors to Abraham announce that (barren) Sarah will bear a son. Mary's response is one of acceptance and compliance – she will do what has been asked of her as she is a servant (*doulos*) of the Lord (v38). Some translations use the word

'handmaid' instead of 'servant', which has other troubling connotations following the dystopian novel and TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*.

- How do you read Mary's response? Is it one of faithful obedience or naïve compliance or thoughtful conviction?
- How does Mary's response fit with later episodes in Luke's narrative (e.g. her song the *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-55, her amazement at Simeon's words in Luke 2:33-35, and her participation in the early Christian community as recorded in Acts 1:14)?

As you reflect on the character of Mary, what inspires you? Is it that God can work through anyone, irrespective of their status? Is it the mystery of bearing God's Son in her body? Is it her acceptance of God's will for her life? Is it her down to earth and practical faith? Is it her deep pondering of words spoken and events that swirl around her? Is it her prophetic joy in declaring the nature of God's kingdom? Is it her example of faithful, costly and persevering life of discipleship? Is it her role as intercessor who both understands the human condition and yet who knows her son, Jesus, the Son of God, so intimately?

### **Blessing** (by Rachel Mann)

May the world-making Creator God nurture us.  
May the womb-made Redeemer God free us.  
May the travelling Spirit of God illuminate our way.  
And may we go out into the world  
to be inspired and troubled by the God  
whose love is as tender as a cactus flower  
and as sharp as its spikes. Amen.

### **Image credits**

Theotokos icon (copies available to purchase through <https://www.easterngiftshop.com/>)

*Ecce Ancilla Domini! (The Annunciation)*, 1849–50, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery; © Tate, London / Art Resource, NY; accessed via The Visual Commentary on Scripture <https://thevcs.org/annunciation/white-annunciation>

An angel visits Mary. Part of the LUMO Project, Free Bible Images, available for use in teaching. <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/mary-angel/>