Advent 4 2025

Matthew 1.18-end

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.

On this side of the Reformation and the Enlightenment on the other, it is really quite unfashionable to try to defend the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus. It seems, to many Protestants, a bit of old-fashioned mariolatry; and to many liberal intellectuals, a bit of outdated superstition. And so it is, that there is —even among Christians—more scepticism around the virgin birth than, say, the resurrection. And, in a way, this is appropriate enough. The resurrection of Christ is, arguably, essential to the Christian gospel in a way that the virgin birth isn't. And yet… I won't try to *defend* the doctrine as such this morning; rather, we will peer critically at some of the common objections before considering what role the doctrine might serve in Christian life.

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Let's take the common objections in order of silliness, from most to least silly.

The silliest, and also most common argument is that, according to science, virgins cannot conceive children, and therefore Mary cannot have done so if she were a virgin. This line of reasoning, such as it is, is silly because *everyone*—including the earliest Christians—know that virgins cannot conceive children: we don't need modern biology to tell us that. No one who believes that Jesus was born of a virgin believes that that was anything short of a miracle.

One could rule out miracles altogether, I suppose, but belief in God entails at least the possibility of the suspension of the laws of nature. There is no *scientific* reason to doubt in miracles, because science concerns regularities in nature, and miracles are, by definition, irregularities that are at least *beyond* nature, even if not in opposition to it.

The second objection is less silly, and has to do with the ways in which early Christians read, heard, and understood the Hebrew Bible—which is, as it happens, *not* in Hebrew but through a commonly-available Greek translation called the Septuagint. The English we heard this morning—"the virgin shall conceive and

bear a son" is a perfectly good translation of the Greek, *parthenos*, which Matthew gets from the Septuagint. Its translators rendered the Hebrew *almah*, meaning "young woman" as *parthenos*, meaning "virgin", rather than *neanis*, which would've been closer. The argument then is that the entire thing about the virgin birth is based on a bad Greek translation of the Hebrew.

This argument holds some water if we privilege the Hebrew text over the Greek. But it's not clear why we should. When it was first produced in Egypt, the Septuagint was hailed by Jews as a miracle. Its use spread quickly, especially in the Jewish diaspora. By the time of Jesus, it enjoyed the status that the King James Version of the Bible did in the English-speaking world for centuries before more modern translations appeared in the 20th century. It is how the earliest Christians accessed the Jewish scripture. Arguably, then, the Christian Old Testament is not the Hebrew Bible but the Greek Septuagint. And if so, then *parthenos—virgin*—is authoritative for us, regardless of what the Hebrew original says.

The third objection is probably the most serious, and is premised on the historical uncertainties around the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus. Almost all

historians agree that we know almost nothing about the early life of Jesus. And the things that many of us think we know rest on very flimsy evidence, according to the canons of modern historiography.

[As some of you heard me say on Wednesday] the earliest Christian documents—the letters of St Paul—seem to know nothing of the nativity stories. Of the four gospels, only two contain nativity stories; and they—Matthew and Luke—are almost entirely independent, containing very little overlap. Our children's books, nativity plays, and nativity creches are composites, taking the angels and shepherds from Luke, the Magi from Matthew, and so forth. Some historians go so far to say that they are irreconcilable, though Christians have always attempted to harmonise the accounts, sometimes quite compellingly.

If, as many historians suppose, the nativity stories in the Bible are pious fictions, designed not to be believed literally, but to say something about who Jesus is theologically; and if the virginal conception is an aspect of the nativity stories; then, perhaps, it too is an act of imagination rather than an article of belief.

On the other hand, the virginal conception is formally detachable from the stories in which it appears, as are other aspects of these stories. For

example, no one seriously doubts that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth. Nor does anyone doubt that his parents were named Mary and Joseph. The fact that both Luke and Matthew—who otherwise agree on little—assert the virginal conception implies at least that this tradition was already quite strong early on in the life of the Church. And venerability holds some weight here. Even in secular contexts, later claims about a person are deemed less reliable than earlier ones.

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In short, the common scientific, historical, and lexical objections are not particularly interesting. Indeed, there is a lesson here about how to think about doctrine more generally. Arguments over doctrine are more often than not about what they *mean*, what they say about God and the world and humanity, and whether what they say is consistent with what we might call a Christian worldview, say in moral and metaphysical terms.

This is where most of the important theological debate happens. On one hand, some Christians worry that the doctrine of the virgin birth is a bit funny about sex; though it is important to point out that it

may be a bit anachronistic to attribute puritanism to the earliest Christians. On the other hand, some Christians argue that the virginity of Mary says something of feminist importance, especially given the historical context, when women's bodies, including their sexual and reproductive activities, were very often very much controlled by men. No man had any say in this case: it was between God and Mary alone. One yet another hand, some Christians wonder about whether someone born of a virgin could possibly be said to be *fully* human. In response, other Christians insist that it signifies continuity and discontinuity simultaneously, so that Jesus is like us essentially, but also leaves aside some inessential and undesirable aspects of being human.

I'm sorry not to give a definitive answer to the question of whether we should believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. But, as we have been discussing throughout the year in our Nicene Creed discussion series, the work of Christian theology is rarely, if ever, to deliver definitive answers. That kind of dogmatic certainty is rendered impossible by our insistence on the ineffability, the mystery, of God. What the Creed gives us, and what our whole tradition of Christian theology offer us are tools for thinking about God and the world.

The doctrine of the virginal birth and conception of Jesus is, and has always been, part of the Christian grammar of understanding and articulating the Incarnation, God's decisive action in the world. Grammar—the rules that structure thought and language—can be followed blindly or creatively bent and even broken; but cannot simply be ignored. So it is with the Virgin Birth, which structures how we think about a surprising number of things, from feminism to what it means to be human. Believe it or no, Christians are at least committed to thinking with and through it.