

Scandalous Virginal Conception

a sermon preached on the

4th Sunday of Advent

Sunday 20 December 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lection: Micah 5:2-4, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55

What is it about Christmas which I find most difficult to accept? It is this: the Divine is birthed out of that which is most despised. In spite of all the many hearings of the Christmas story, still I struggle to accept the heart of their message. The Divine child is born out the back, in an animal feeding trough, to a peasant woman, in a Jewish backwater. The God-bearer, the Mother of our Lord, is a nobody, a poor and unmarried nobody. The manner of her conception has always been, and continues to be, a matter of great scandal. Her cousin is an old barren woman, who gives birth to the Voice that cries in the wilderness. The birth of the Divine child is witnessed by nobodies, poor and despised shepherds, and animals.

I know about all these things regarding the birth of the One long-hoped-for! I know *about* all this, and have preached about it. And yet I find it insurmountably-difficult to accept. The problem, in part, is the emphasis on knowing *as information*. Advent's four candles symbolically prepare us not for passing a history examination, let alone an examination of Aristotelian metaphysics!

Like all things liturgical, the four candles of Advent are only in part about the history of the one we call Jesus Christ and his Bethlehem coming about 2000 years ago. As in all matters of religious ritual, Advent's four candles symbolise a present reality which is to be embodied in the here and now, in the you and the me. This is the basis of my struggle to accept that the Divine is birthed in the most despised and rejected place.

For it is the peculiarly-Christian insight that the despised and rejected within my own being is the manger-bed of the infant Divine. It is the barren and virginal within me that is the womb that is in travail. This, it has to be admitted, is exceptionally difficult to accept. Just as Israel might have been able to accept a mighty Davidic king, with all a king's trappings and power, as their Messiah – so too I prefer what I can demonstrate as accomplishment, achievement, 'success', as measurable and demonstrable sign of being in control of my life.

Perhaps this morning's news from Copenhagen is not surprising, albeit disappointing - wealthy nations unable to accept that the earth's future lies not with our much-vaunted successes, but with the despised and poor to whom the wealthy are unprepared to listen.

On Advent's fourth Sunday the prime symbol is that of Mary's virginal conception. All attempts to make sense of this mystery-of-mysteries as philosophical, historical, or physiological argument are bound to fail – as events in Auckland this week once again demonstrate. Such argument fails to appreciate that Mary's conception is a symbol of the highest order, truth with a capital T.

And the real reason for my struggle to accept that the Divine is birthed in the despised and rejected lies in my unwillingness to accept the virginal conception which the Holy Spirit desires to work through me. I am unable to say with Mary: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."¹ I want to remain in charge of the direction of my life, to promote those accomplishments which I imagine I have achieved by dint of hard work, persistence, and so on.

But the Spirit of God desires that I should conceive that which I did not fashion or invent or work for. The

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Luke 1:38

Spirit of God creates an entirely new life, out of the despised and rejected part of myself. This is the **τελειωσις** *teleiōsis* completion, the fulfilment, of the gospel: “For God has looked with favour on the lowliness of [the] servant... God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”²

Herein lies the scandalous secret of the virginal conception – only by consciously, willingly relinquishing my accomplishments, my control, my sense of power, can I conceive by the Holy Spirit – and be God-bearer with Mary. Little wonder I struggle to accept this gospel!

Yet, in spite of my reluctance and resistance, the Spirit of God continues to approach me, in the guise of angels who take many manifestations. God’s eternal desire is Incarnation. The **Θεωτοκος** *Theōtokos* Mary is but the first among disciples, the first to be overshadowed by the Most High, the first to be blessed with virginal conception of the Divine child.

Across the expanse of time, from one end of the cosmos to the other, the Spirit of God is eternally overshadowing, seeking out the barren and despised womb in each of us, conceiving virginally the Divine child out of that which we have despised and rejected and neglected.

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