

SERMON 903

December 21, 2014

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

977th Week as Priest

804th Week at St Dunstan's

69th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



THE VIRGIN MARY

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” That’s how the angel Gabriel greeted Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph, who was of the house of David.

And then, of course, the angel Gabriel had to say what angels always have to say next to mortals: “Do not be afraid.” Easier said than done. Mary was a teenager, probably about 15 or 16. And she was a virgin. But that was about to change—if

Mary was willing. “And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,” explained the angel, “and you will name him Jesus.”

It’s not entirely clear from the narrative, but Mary had a choice. She had to agree to the angel’s proposal—and only then would the Holy Spirit come upon her, and the power of the Most High overshadow her. She had a choice to make, and she could have decided otherwise.

Gabriel tells us that this will be no ordinary baby: the child will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High. These are not words to be taken lightly or unadvisedly. The child will be a king and he will sit upon the throne of his ancestor David.

“How can this be?” asked Mary, “since I am a virgin.”

Some Christians have a great deal of trouble accepting Mary’s virginity. They say it is unimportant to the story, or an obvious fraud, or that Joseph was the father, or some boy in the village of Nazareth.

I believe that Mary was a virgin, and that God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was and is the Father of Jesus Christ. And the reason I believe this to be true is because Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. As we say in the Creed, he was begotten of the Father, and born of Mary—fully God and

fully Man. And therefore, Jesus is Emmanuel—God who is with us, God made Man. This is the essential concept of the Incarnation. And that is why, for me and I hope for you, the virgin birth is not a fairy tale but a theological truth.

The great heresies of the Early Church scoffed at the Virgin Birth with all the logical argument and educated skepticism they could muster. In Alexandria, the scholars explained that Jesus was a spiritual being who only appeared to be a human being. In Antioch, they insisted that Jesus was only a human being and not a spiritual one. Only those in the middle way, who could allow for the ambiguity of a holy mystery, were able to consider (and come to accept) that Jesus was both a human child and the Son of God.

The two natures of Christ—human and divine—were recognized in the Nicene Creed from the Fourth Century AD, and this is the Creed that we say faithfully at each Sunday Eucharist, to this very day. But in order to do this, we must be willing to accept a holy mystery.

It is vital for us to understand that Mary did indeed accept the holy mystery—and it certainly affected her more than any other ordinary human being who has ever lived. I purposely said “any other ordinary human being,” because that is precisely what I believe Mary was. Mary, whom I occasionally refer to as “Plain Old Mary,” had to be ordinary

and fully human, and nothing more, else the Incarnation means nothing.

There have been attempts by some churches and their leaders to have their followers believe that Mary was forever a virgin, that she had no other children of her own, and that she was immaculately conceived herself, and that she did not die but was bodily assumed into heaven, and that perhaps she is somehow a participant or even co-redemptrix in Christ's salvation of the world. But these are not a part of the sacred stories; they are extra-curricular imaginings of men of power who divide women into two categories—virgins and prostitutes—and they cannot accept that there are real, live, living, breathing, intelligent, capable, faithful women who can be deacons, and priests, and bishops, and presiding bishops, and the Queen of England, and even the *theotokos*, the God Bearer.

The good news for today is that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was a real, live, living, breathing, intelligent, capable, faithful young woman. She was Plain Old Mary, but she was also a remarkable person of such courage, and determination, and integrity, that the angel Gabriel was sent to enlist her in a holy mystery—to be the *theotokos*, the God Bearer—and thanks be to God, she said 'Yes!' **AMEN.**

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