

You Will Conceive and Bear a Son (Luke 1. 26-38)

© Sarah Bachelard

James Alison remarked that the gospel of Luke reads at times like a Hollywood script. There are events and snatches of dialogue, characters begin to develop and then, suddenly, the scene changes and we're in another part of the story, being introduced to new characters and not yet sure how the lines connect. Last week, we were introduced to the character of Zechariah, a priest in the Jerusalem Temple. Chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary, Zechariah was offering incense before God while the people prayed outside, when 'there appeared to him an angel of the Lord'. The angel, whose name was Gabriel, announced to Zechariah that his prayers had been answered, and that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son whose vocation would be to 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord'. Zechariah emerges from this encounter, dumbstruck; he finishes his time of service in the Temple and goes home. The scene concludes with a short coda. It's as if the camera pans to Zechariah's home and gives us the tiniest glimpse of Elizabeth. 'After those days', writes Luke, 'his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people"'. And ... cut.

Cue then, the second major scene of the gospel – different location, different characters – linked, in the first instance, only by the figure of Gabriel. 'In the sixth month' of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel is sent by God 'to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary' (Luke 1. 26-27).

I introduced our observance of Advent last week, by speaking of our longing that the life of God, the possibility of God, might break more fully into our world, into systems and lives that seem so often preoccupied by penultimate things – by anxiety,

self-interest, money, control. I said that in the Advent stories, we're given hints about the conditions for receiving this in-breaking life. Luke's gospel testifies that the birth of God at the human level, the shift God makes possible for human consciousness, does not happen out of nowhere. There's a necessary spiritual and relational hinterland for God's advent which is both personal and communal.

But what exactly are we imagining happens when we speak of God being born among us? In a famous Christmas sermon, the mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart wrote 'Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature'. Eckhart then quoted St. Augustine who said "'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.'" So Eckhart continues: 'We shall therefore speak of this birth, of how it may take place in us'.¹ But again, what are we actually talking about here? What is brought to birth through Mary and must be brought to birth in and through us? What does it mean, as Gabriel puts it, to 'conceive' the divine life?

In the gospel story, Gabriel tells Mary that the child she's to conceive 'will be called the Son of the Most High'; indeed, he 'will be called Son of God'. In our tradition, this way of speaking signifies two things. First, to recognise Jesus as 'Son of God' is a way of affirming that he was in the world as the very presence of divine action and life. He wasn't just 'a witness to or promise of' that presence, like the prophets and priests of Israel. Rather, he was that presence, '*that action itself*' incarnate in human form;² Light from Light, True God from True God (as the Nicene Creed puts it). And second, to speak of Jesus as **Son** of God implies, by definition, his being in relation to a Parent. A Son is only a Son in relation to a Father or Mother. But if Jesus himself is God, then this suggests that Sonship, child-ship, being in relation, must somehow be internal to the being of God.

¹ Meister Eckhart, *Dum Medium Silentium*, Sermon on Wisdom 18:14. See *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed., Maurice O'C. Walshe (Crossroad: 2009), p.29. Cited in <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/mothering-god-2019-12-25/>

² Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.55. Italics in original.

I know this is a bit dense. But here's the key point. If Jesus is conceived as the Son of God, this suggests that within the being of God is a receiving of life as well as a giving, passivity as well as agency, responsiveness as well as initiation, a word spoken as well as a speaker, filiation as well as generation.³ In other words, because of Jesus we become able to recognise that the being of God is relational, an eternal dynamic of Being turned beyond itself so as to generate life for another. God is an eternal self-giving, which is received and returned. You can see how it's because of the Incarnation that the church was ultimately led to the doctrine of the Trinity.

With this in mind, then, let's come back to our question. What are we imagining when we talk of God's life breaking in to our lives, God coming into our world? What do we think happened with the birth of Jesus, and will happen if we consent to God being born in and through us? According to the gospel, the one conceived by Mary and born in Bethlehem is a Son. Not a non-relational superhuman power, a self-willed assertive deity like the gods of Greece and Rome. Who is born is a Son. A person characterised by radical receptivity to the source of his life and thus radically self-bestowing in return; a human being who makes visible the nature God had from the beginning. As Meister Eckhart put it, 'Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature'. And why do we celebrate? Because he reveals we may become like him.

That's why St Paul speaks of the Christian life in terms of our becoming children of God, filial, sons and daughters by adoption. We're invited to be open in the same way as Jesus was to receiving from and returning to the Father, wholly participating in the aliveness and loving of God. So when Paul says that, in Christ, 'we will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom. 8.21) this isn't a promise of special family privileges for a chosen few. It's a vision of a people drawn by the Spirit of Jesus into sharing his relationship with the Father, which means becoming filial as he was, wholly receptive to the gift and call of God's self-bestowing

³ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p.29.

life. It means no longer conceiving ourselves as independent from the source of our being, but being in the world as he was, wholly turned to God and neighbour for the sake of life's increase. Which is why, as St Augustine puts it, even if this birth is always happening in God, it avails me nothing if it does not happen in me – in us. 'That it should happen in me is what matters'.

At one level, the Advent stories testify that God is determined to give the possibility of a new, filial and so radically transfigured humanity. The angel is sent by God and on God's initiative, the Spirit of God overshadows Mary, people are being prepared to recognise and receive. But in the end, the stories also testify that realising this possibility requires our participation. Mary must consent to conceive God bodily in her womb and then to undergo God's impact in her life; and so it is with us. As we continue, then, to open ourselves personally and communally to the promise of Advent, may we with Mary be bold to declare: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word'.