

Thoughts From Other Minds:

We should observe in this passage *the benefit of fellowship and communion between believers*. We read of a visit paid by the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elisabeth. We are told in a striking manner how the hearts of both these holy women were cheered, and their minds lifted up by this interview. Without this visit, Elisabeth might never have been so filled with the Holy Ghost as we are here told she was; and Mary might never have uttered that song of praise which is now known all over the Church of Christ. ...

We should always regard communion with other believers as an eminent means of grace. It is a refreshing break in our journey along the narrow way to exchange with our fellow travellers. It helps us insensibly and it helps them, and so is a mutual gain. It is the nearest approach that we can make on earth to the joy of heaven. ... There are many who fear the Lord and think upon His name, and yet forget to speak often one to another. (Malachi 3:16.) First let us seek the face of God. Then let us seek the face of God's friends. If we did this more, and were more careful about the company we keep, we should oftener know what it is to feel "filled with the Holy Ghost."

Finally, we should observe in these verses, *the high praise which Elisabeth bestows upon the grace of faith*. "Blessed," she says, "is she that believed."

We need not wonder that this holy woman should thus commend faith. ... She knew the great thing that faith had done. What is the whole history of God's saints in every age but a record of men and women who obtained a good report by faith? What is the simple story of all from Abel downwards but a narrative of redeemed sinners who believed, and so were blessed? By faith they embraced promises. By faith they lived. By faith they walked. By faith they endured hardships. By faith they looked to an unseen Saviour, and good things yet to come. By faith they battled with the world, the flesh, and the devil. By faith they overcame, and got safe home. Of this goodly company the Virgin Mary was proving herself one. No wonder that Elisabeth said, "Blessed is she that believed."

Do we know anything of this precious faith? This, after all, is the question that concerns us. Do we know anything of the faith of God's elect, the faith which is of the operation of God? (Titus 1:2. Col. 2:12.) Let us never rest till we know it by experience. Once knowing it let us never cease to pray that our faith may grow exceedingly. Better a thousand times be rich in faith than rich in gold. Gold will be worthless in the unseen world to which we are all travelling. Faith will be owned in that world before God the Father and the holy angels. 'When the great white throne is set and the books are opened, when the dead are called from their graves, and receiving their final sentence, the value of faith will at last be fully known. Men will learn then, if they never learned before, how true are the words, "Blessed are they that believed."

J C Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Luke, Vol. 1, pp. 30-33.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Pastoral Charge

4 December 2016

Sermon: "Preparing for the coming of the Lord # 2" (text: Lk 1:26-56)

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-17 Luke 1:26-56

Sermon Notes

Introduction: Last Lord's Day we began a Christmas series of studies in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel. We saw that Luke, unlike many modern people, who categorically deny any connection between history and religious belief, teaches that historical evidence can give certainty about the Christian faith.

We are very grateful for Luke's careful research into the supernatural historical events that are foundational to our Faith, for we know that the gospel isn't 'live a good life to be good enough for heaven,' but the good news that God has intervened in history to save us from our sins and their consequences—hell!

We are particularly grateful for his careful history as we come to our second study, for we now hear him say that the angel that told Zechariah that he and his barren wife Elizabeth would have a son also promised a virgin that she too would bear a son (Lk 1:26-31).

1. Is the Virgin Birth credible?

Many find this difficult to believe. They know, as we know, and as Mary knew, that virgins do not conceive; yet Luke declares that not only did Gabriel tell a virgin that she would conceive, but that she actually did conceive (v. 45). Is it believable? Is it reasonable to believe that Mary bore a son who had not human father?

This question is more relevant for us than ever, for there are many, even in the church, who say that we need not believe in the virgin birth to be a Christian. William Barclay, for example, writes, 'The Church does not insist that we believe in this doctrine.' His church may not, but it is clear in the scriptures and in the creeds.

Such belief cannot be compelled; it is ridiculous to reject it because there are no DNA samples to prove it! The question is, 'Is the historical evidence that Luke provides credible? Is it reasonable to believe in the virgin birth? Is it true that the claims about Jesus' birth are the same as for other great men of the ancient world?

The testimony about other 'virgin births' may be legendary, but Luke's account comes to us as sober history; if it were not about the supernatural it would be accepted without question. This is no 'once upon a time story, but an orderly account from a competent historian who was on the scene and also a physician (Col 4:14).

It adds to the credibility of his account that Mary didn't just happen to conceive; this is not nature going out of her course (Thomas Paine's on miracles) but God intervening: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you ... nothing will be impossible with God." (vs. 35, 37).

Also, in considering the credibility of Luke's account of the virgin birth, we must remember that it is the birth of Jesus that is in view. It may have been said that other great men of the ancient world were virgin born—but Jesus not only claimed to be a divine person; he proved his words by doing what only God could do!

By his spoken word he expelled demons, cleansed lepers, calmed the stormy wind and storm tossed waves and even raised dead people to life. Furthermore, while he was crucified, dead and buried, he rose from the dead on the third day after he was buried so that while all the other 'greats' are dead, he is alive!

2. Is/was the Virgin Birth necessary?

Some might say, "Yes, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin—but was it necessary, and is it necessary that we believe it? Why did God make it so hard for modern people like us, trained from infancy to hostility to the supernatural, to become Christians?"

The virgin birth was necessary because Jesus was no mere man, but a true man who was and is the son of God (vs. 32, 35, 41-43). If Joseph had been his biological father Jesus would have been a mere man and a sinner and unable to be the Saviour of sinners.

But Jesus wasn't a mere man; he didn't have a human father; the creative power of the Holy Spirit took the place of a human father in his conception so that as the Son of God he was holy (v. 35) - and so he is the answer to sin and the head of a new redeemed race, of people 'in Christ', of us who believe in him (1 Pet 1:18-19).

The virgin birth is also necessary to maintain Mary's integrity, honour and testimony. William Barclay attempts to make the case that Joseph was Jesus' father; while the scripture makes it clear that he was Jesus' legal father it is also clear that he was not his biological father. (v. 34, cf also Matthew 1:18-25).

Mary's testimony is that the child was neither Joseph's nor any other man's, but of the Lord, and that this was typical of the 'great reversal' of his salvation (vs. 47-49). Mary's God is her Saviour, and his salvation is a reversal of all the world expects, an overturning of the old order for a new order.

The world expected Messiah of royalty, in Jerusalem, but 'the Lord's choice passes over the proud, the mighty, the rich and lighted upon her as the future mother of his Son.' This is the way God works in salvation; he humbles the proud and exalts the humble; this was not only for Mary; his mercy is for all who fear him (v. 50).

Mary sees the Lord's saving work 'as good as done' in great reversals (vs. 51-54); we see this in Jesus, and his gospel (1 Cor 1:22-23) and in those who respond to this gospel 'so that no one may boast in the presence of God' (1 Cor 1:26-29).

Samuel Rutherford was right when he said heaven was a place where 'few kings and great folks come.' Like Mary, he understood God's ways, sending the rich away and filling those who like Mary believe his word and trust him for life and death.

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why are we particularly glad of Luke's careful history as we come to his account of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and the annunciation?
2. Why, as Christians, do we believe it is reasonable to believe that Mary did conceive while still a virgin? How might we respond from the scriptures to those who wish to bear the name 'Christian' but who do not believe?
3. How might we respond to sceptics like Thomas Paine who would say that it is more probable that people will lie than that nature go out of her course? Why is Jesus virgin birth more credible than the alleged virgin births of other great men of antiquity?
4. Why was Jesus' virgin birth necessary with regard to:
 - a. his person (who he was/is)?
 - b. his work (salvation)?
 - c. Mary's integrity, honour and testimony?
5. How does Mary's song testify to the 'great reversal' of salvation that comes to sinners through faith in her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?