

## a cloud over the virgin birth

Luke's Gospel tells us that – in response to the angel's visit – Mary was “perplexed and wondered what sort of greeting this was?” Clearly, there's a lot that goes unsaid in this account of the virgin birth. And it's always raised the question for me: does Mary really have a choice?

When I read that “The angel said to Mary, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ ...” I can't help read it into a power dynamic. Is this, as some modern scholars have argued, God forcing himself on the unsuspecting young Mary?

There are stories like that in Greek mythology. For example, when the god Zeus – disguised in the form of a bull or a swan, – overpowers and impregnates young maidens. And they give birth to semi-divine offspring like Hercules or Perseus.

Is the incarnation and virgin birth Mary's #metoo moment, her “solidarity with the many women who have voiced in a hashtag their experiences of position and power wielded for sexual gratification against their dignity as women, their bodies, their being?”

The problem really is with that word overshadow: “... the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” That's the part that brings me to ask whether there is choice for Mary in the story of incarnation? But is this what Jesus' virgin birth and incarnation are about? Are we looking at a Christian re-working of Greek mythology?

Well, thank God for the Church Times. And for the theologian and priest, Angela Tilby. She helps us put to rest any concerns that the story of the Virgin Birth is the story of a young woman overpowered and ravished into a divine sexual union as in the myths.

Tilby turns to medieval art representing the angel's message to Mary in this passage. Specifically, Tilby directs our attention to the

tradition of paintings portraying “an inscribed scroll, or a dove, or a beam of light pointing to Mary's head – and sometimes, directly to her ear.” This was supposed to illustrate Christ's conception as the perfect union between God's spoken Word and Mary's gracious reception of that Word.

Tilby writes: (in these traditional depictions) “Through Mary's ear, the divine Word entered, and dwelt secretly in her womb.” And she adds that the idea of Christ's conception taking place – firstly – in Mary's hearing wasn't simply a case of early Christian squeamishness about sex and female bodies. It was, Tilby says, a deliberate attempt to put a clear distance between the story of Christ and ancient beliefs about gods producing offspring with humans.

Let's be absolutely clear about one thing: Jesus birth is not the birth of a mythological figure, a hybrid, half human and half divine. The Gospel writers and early Christians claim something far more radical and unique about Jesus. They claim that Jesus is both/and, fully human and fully divine. But how they do this is striking, as our today's reading in Luke's Gospel shows: they insist that God makes the birth of the Saviour wholly dependent on Mary's consent.

To put it another way, they insist that Mary's hospitality, her Yes, becomes the condition of communion with the divine. So the mystery of the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth is exactly the opposite of the sexually-charged Greek god overpowering a young woman.

God does not coerce Mary, because love does not coerce!

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast. Love is not self-seeking. It does not dishonour others. It always protects, always trusts. (1 Cor 13).*

We're familiar with that passage. And we might add: **Love makes room for the other.** Because it is in Mary's making room for the divine other – **in her hearing and in her speaking her consent that she receives, conceives, and the Word becomes flesh! Love fully human and fully divine comes to dwell among us.**

If this is a story of power, it must be the power of love, a love that constellates in Mary a fearless spirit that says YES in a dearth of certainty. Mary, staring into the abyss of the unknown, gives her everything: "let it be unto me according to God's word." (She doesn't even seem disappointed that, – 2-thousand years before ultra-sound, – the angel blows the surprise and tells Mary: it's going to be a boy!)

This passage came up in conversation at yesterday's International Group Breakfast. The breakfast is a social, befriending event with asylum seekers who have no recourse to state support.

A conversation took an unexpected turn when one of our guest – out of the blue – offered a theology of the Incarnation and Virgin Birth. It went something along these lines, and I tell it here with permission, and really, by request. Here's what I was told:

"Try this on Reverend Lucy. See what she thinks: Jesus is God born into a world of uncertainty. There's uncertainty for Mary about her pregnancy; about being unmarried, and what she will face. And uncertainty for Jesus about the world he is born into. Jesus had to go into exile because Herod was killing all the babies. But God put himself in that world of uncertainty."

(Do, if you can, ask Rev'd Lucy what she makes of that, theologically.)

Now, you'll think I'm making this up. There was a separate conversation, with another person proposing yet another take on this. This person asked me: What does it mean that God overshadows Mary?

I said at the beginning that I've always struggled with that word. And fortunately, I had already looked up the word in the original Greek in preparing the sermon.

The word our bibles translate as "overshadowed" has the root EPISKÍA (episkivazw). It only comes up four or five times in the Bible. And usually referring to a cloud overhead, covering the sun, and casting shadow below.

Now, here in London, where we have only so many days of us in the year, we might see a cloud overhead in a negative light. But you can imagine why, under a hot sun – if you live in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine desert climate – EPISKÍA, a cloud casting a cooling shadow below would be a comforting image.

So the word overshadow comes with positive associations. Another word association with EPISKIA: you can just about hear there the word EPISCOPAL ... which is just a churchy word referring to bishops. It simply means "oversight," the task of leading and overseeing.

So, for example, our newly appointed bishop of London, – Sarah Mullaly, – will have pastoral, EPISCOPAL oversight, and in that sense, leadership responsibility, over the churches in London. To use a different biblical image, Bishop Sarah will exercise shepherding care over her flock. So we can, I hope you agree, read the word EPISKIA ... "overshadow" in the story of the virgin birth as GOD'S POWER SHEPHERDING MARY.

There is a third association, a resonance between EPISKIA and the Hebrew word for "abiding" in the Old Testament. And so we can read this as the angel saying to Mary: "God's power will ABIDE with you and you will conceive."

In the event, there I was, "mansplaining" all this in the conversation ... a bit like I'm doing now. And that's when my friend stops me and takes the theology to a whole other level and says ... "Hang on: so 'overshadow' in this passage really means ... GOD'S BENIGN, OVERSEEING, AND PROTECTION!"

And I'm trying to contain my excitement. And I'm nodding in agreement, and saying, Yes! I think that it! Can I steal this and use this in my sermon tomorrow? And this description reminded me that the word OVERSHADOW in the Virgin Birth also resonates with the opening in Genesis: in which the Spirit of God is hovering over the waters at creation.

Then my friend turns it up yet another notch! And says ... "So we can say that Mary trusted and had faith in God. But God also had faith in her!"

**And I'm just blown away at this point because now we're worlds away from sexualised Greek mythologies.** We're in the realm of grace: we're in the realm of God's favour, compassion and faith for humanity. We're in the sphere of Mary's yes, of her consent championing the cause of all humanity.

If you've ever wanted to go to theological school, just come to our International Group Breakfast on a Saturday.

I've been spending a bit of time with Arabella Dorman's installation ... SUSPENDED ... these pieces of clothing discarded by refugees fleeing for their; recovered from people who've had to leave everything behind.

I've been trying to see it from different angles. Trying to imagine how other people will see it; what others would make of it as a focus of prayer in our church. Someone described it as a chandelier: you can see that, something shedding light on refugees and asylum seekers. Someone else described it as the inside of a tumble dryer. I can see that too. Though that images doesn't get us very far.

I wonder if we can see it this morning as Mary's heart, where God's saving promise was first formed.

**More to the point, can we see it as the heart of this church? Can we see it as the promises of God and the freedom of our YES to God coming together and forming the heart of this church a destiny fully human and fully divine?**

And can we see that light at the centre as the power of god seeding itself, taking root, growing here among us?

This heart and promise overshadows our prayer, our reading of scripture, our consenting to god in the breaking of the bread.

Our job this morning isn't to dissolve the mystery of the Virgin Birth. And we may need to for the moment suspend judgement: to let the mystery be and simply live with the fact that in the story of the Virgin Birth, an unplanned pregnancy becomes good news for all humanity.

But we can also let Mary's YES! resound within us and let her YES! voice of OUR consent to God!

OUR

YES! to LIFE.

YES! to unexpected grace.

YES! to THE GOD of surprises.

YES! to Life beyond life.

YES! to Love in a time of uncertainty.

YES! to life-changing encounters.

YES! to the Word made flesh.

YES! to the Word that WAS

in the beginning, and was WITH God, and was GOD.

YES! to the power of God abiding with us

YES! to God among us,

God with us,

God for us:

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Let it be unto you and me according to God's WORD.

Ivan Khovacs