

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' - which means 'God with us.' Matthew 1.22.

A few years ago there was a headline in *The Daily Telegraph* which screamed: 'QUARTER OF CLERGY DO NOT BELIEVE IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH.' A poll of 500 clerics found that 27% privately reject the traditional story of Jesus's birth. The view of a Hampshire vicar was typical:

*There was nothing special about his birth or childhood - it was his adult life that was extraordinary.*

Interestingly the clergyman declined to be named but added:

*I have a very traditional bishop and this is one of those topics I don't go public on. I need to keep the job I've got.*

And clergymen wonder why our churches are declining! Where's the integrity? Another minister said of the gospel writers:

*Writers at the time used to stress a person's importance by making up stories about their early life. I think that is exactly what has happened here.*

So, (to use modern parlance), the gospel writers told lies by 'sexing up' the life of Christ, and modern-day clergymen know this. But how do they know this? Not only are the gospel-writers 2000 years ago liars, but so are today's ministers. In the report most of those clergymen who cast doubt on the virgin birth admitted that they would be presiding over traditional Christmas services which stressed the miraculous nature of Christ's birth. Revd Keith Archer of Salford said:

*We will be having a traditional service because that is what people expect and enjoy. There are times and places for this debate.*

Where is the integrity in that? A colleague added:

*I do not believe in the virgin birth, but I would not argue for that point of view in a sermon, because I simply don't believe it is that important an issue.*

It must be great to be so intelligent that you know better than the Bible, and that you can cope with biblical problems which would only confuse your poor, dim congregation.

This two-facedness of some of the clergy is very revealing. So also was the reaction of newspapers to some ministers who dared to say publicly - wait for it! - that *Santa* couldn't possibly exist. The newspapers went potty over this outrage, and yet there was hardly a squeak over the fact that over a quarter of the clergy said they did not believe in the Virgin Birth. What a mad world we live in!

So, *is* the Virgin Birth not that important an issue? Well, yes it is, and that's because of a little thing called *integrity*. The fact is that the NT does make it clear that Jesus was virginally conceived. We are in a very dangerous position when church leaders feel free to alter the Bible simply because they don't agree with it. Of course the idea of a virgin birth is difficult, but you must think a lot about yourself to say, 'Because *I* can't understand something, it can't possibly happen', and then, to compound the error, to claim that the writers of the gospels have made up the story to make their subject, Jesus, appear spectacular. So, just because some clergymen can't understand something, they are prepared to rewrite the Bible, claim that God can't do certain miraculous things and say that the gospel writers are liars.

Ah, but you see, the clever-clogs will argue that the OT text from *Isaiah* 7.14 which says that 'A Virgin shall conceive' is a mistranslation from Hebrew. The Hebrew doesn't say 'Virgin', only 'a young woman'. It's the *Greek* which uses

the word *parthenos*, 'virgin'. That's clever, but false. Actually *parthenos* can mean 'young woman' also. Dinah, who had just been raped by Shechem in *Gen34.3* was then called a *parthenos*; she was hardly a virgin! And St Luke who also tells of the Virgin Birth doesn't use the *Is 7.14* text at all.

So why would the gospel writers make up this Virgin Birth when the Incarnation is not proved by it. Being virginally conceived without a man does not logically prove you are God! Actually, the Virgin Birth made life *more* difficult for the early church. Pagans who knew the myths, say, of Perseus and Hercules being born by the gods would misunderstand Jesus. And interestingly the *Is 7.14* verse does *not* say that the child born of the virgin would be the *Messiah*. Nowhere does the OT say that the Messiah would be virginally conceived. It *does*, however, say that the Messiah would descend from *David*, and the one thing that links Jesus to David is Joseph. So why make up a weird story about a virgin birth which actually *excludes* the one person, Joseph, who would prove Jesus's vital descent from David? The Virgin Birth also opened Jesus up to the terrible charge of illegitimacy, and Mary to that of adultery. This was hardly the way to commend Jesus to the Jews.

So why is the account of the Virgin Birth which makes it *harder* for us sceptics to believe today in the NT? I can only conclude that it is because it is *true*! Forgive me for going into the argumentation so much, but we really do need to rediscover our confidence in the Bible as God's Word of truth. So long as we Christians keep on assuming that, apart from the moralising bits, the Bible is fables, the Church will continue

to decline. How can we expect others to believe when *we don't*?

But what does this Virgin Birth mean for *me*, for *you*, as we struggle with our daily lives? It means that in an utterly extraordinary way God the eternal and pre-existent Son has become a human being, Jesus. Born of Mary, God has entered time and history, to be *with you* as Immanuel, God-with-us. Born of Mary in a stable, Jesus was fully human and lived the same life *you* live. But as the Virgin Birth was unique and extraordinary, so *Jesus* was unique and extraordinary, being fully human and fully divine at the same time. OK, that's all fine and dandy but so what? But here's the biggest challenge.

How can we ever rise from our human situation of failure, selfishness, weakness, cruelty? How can I stop being the morally feeble creature that I am? I want it so much, and yet I keep being dragged down again by the force of gravity called sin. Certainly we human beings can't cure ourselves; we are part of the problem. That's why politicians are bound to fail. If Jesus is only a man like us, but a bit better, he's still a man and therefore part of the problem. If he is just God, then he has no part in us. But because he is both God *and* man, he joins in his very person humanity and divinity. In Jesus the divine became human to make the human divine. By being both God *and* man, he can be our Mediator, joining us to God. Jesus came *down* at Christmas in order to lift us *up*. And as we look into our own shabby hearts, and at the rotten world around us, we jolly well *need* to be lifted up. When Joseph adopted the baby he gave him the name JESUS, which means 'Jehovah saves'.