



## **Luke 1:34–36**

34 ‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ 35 The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

## Reflection

I wonder if you've ever heard older Australians describe Australia as a Christian country; when clearly, on the whole, it is not? What I think these older Australians typically mean is that Australia, like much of the Western world, is a country founded on Christian values like 'right and wrong', 'truth and falsehood' and the value of 'life over death'. And I think most Australians, even those of the younger generations who may have forgotten where these values have come from, would agree that justice, truth and the sanctity of human life are all foundational to our culture. Sociologists describe this as being post-Christian, with far few people openly professing the Christian faith than say, the fifties,

yet the majority still holding on to broadly Christian values even if we no longer remember where these values come from.

Yet if Australia can be described as post-Christian, the ancient world was distinctly pre-Christian, which made ancient societies very different from the way we live today. At the top of their value hierarchy wasn't right over wrong, or truth over falsehood, or life over death. The chief end in life in the ancient world was to obtain honour and avoid shame. If you needed to lie to achieve that end, so be it. If someone needed to die to achieve that end, so be it.

Honour was universally regarded in Mediterranean societies as the ultimate asset for human beings, and shame the ultimate

deficit – so much so that ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman societies have come to be known as ‘honour-shame cultures’. Much of life centred around ensuring you and your family received public honour and avoided public shame.

For example, uppermost in a father’s mind in the ancient world was not whether his son would be happy or make money or live morally, but whether the boy would bring honour to the family, especially to his father, and to himself. This isn’t to say that the ancients didn’t value justice, social order and kindness. It’s just that the honour one gains through such things was the higher goal. The flipside was that among a person’s greatest fears was to be publicly shamed.

Returning to our example of family life, a Roman husband whose wife was found to be having an affair would feel more injured by the public shame she brought on him than by the betrayal of love itself. Ancient husbands could be as jealous as anyone in the modern world, but shame was the greater catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

And with this particular example in mind, I'd like you to consider today's passage of Scripture. To set the scene I'm going to read from a few verses earlier, Luke 1:26–34,

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,

27 to a virgin pledged to be married

<sup>1</sup>John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011), 86–89.

to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.' 34 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am

a virgin?’ 35 The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

In the wonder of the angel Gabriel’s announcement and our familiarity with the story it’s easy to miss Mary’s predicament here. Mary is a young teenage girl from a small town on the wrong side of the tracks. In addition to living in an honour-shame culture, she’s Jewish, which means she’s a member of sub-culture who took chastity, betrothal and marriage vows very se-

riously. Gabriel's just made a colossal announcement. Mary might not have been able to take it all in, in the moment, but no doubt she would have got the gist. 'You are going to become pregnant; you are going to call your son's name *Salvation* (Jesus, or Joshua in Hebrew, means 'God saves'), he is going to be the *Son of God*, and he will be the *Messiah!*' But it's the first part of the announcement that Mary is immediately caught up upon. The pregnancy part. The part where God is asking her to carry a child as a virgin without being married. Verse 34,

34 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

With these words Mary is not doubting Gabriel, she merely wants to understand



how she will conceive as she is a virgin or, in the original Greek, ‘since I am not knowing a man[husband]’.

When Gabriel brought news of the disgrace being lifted from Zechariah’s household at the birth of a son, Zechariah doubted. For Mary, disgrace is about to descend, yet she believes, accepts, and will shortly praise God despite what will inevitably follow. In ancient culture, let alone within her tightknit Jewish community, it is hard to put words to the disgrace this would have brought down on her family and her already questionable village. ‘Oh look, another pregnant virgin from Nazareth. There seem to be quite a few in that town!’ It’s very likely that Gabriel’s news will cost her Joseph, her-husband-to-be, and may make her an outcast even among her own

family. And yet Mary trusts God, and humbly accepts and believes Gabriel, merely asking how these miraculous events will occur. Gabriel answers,

‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

Just as the divine cloud overshadowed the tabernacle in Exodus 40, when God overshadowed it and infused it with his presence and glory, so too with the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary. In the tabernacle, now become the Most Holy Place in the Temple in Jerusalem, God chose to materialise and localise himself within a particular time and space, so too in Mary’s

womb and with the birth of Jesus. Jesus would not be born by the normal biological process. His conception would occur by the power of the Holy Spirit. All of humanity is created in God's image, but Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, will bear the closest resemblance of any to God, he will grow to become the image of the invisible bearing the exact imprint of his nature, and be rightfully known as both the Son of God and God in the flesh.

## **Think & Pray**

But to close today I'd love you to meditate over Mary's openness to suffer disgrace for the sake of Jesus' name. Spend some time thinking over Mary's plight and the natural response of her heart as God calls her to risk everything and put her trust in

him. How important are the expectations of others to you? How prepared are you to stick your neck out or rock the boat for your Christian faith?

Pray along these lines this morning asking God for a faith and trust like Mary's, especially when God's will for your life causes friction with expectations set on you by others. Perhaps it's the partner you intend to marry, a wonderful Christian who isn't the doctor your parents hoped he be. Or maybe it's an ethical decision at work that you're copping a lot of heat for. Pray for faith and trust like Mary's in times like these, and the ability to rejoice over them as she will shortly, rejoicing that God would count you too worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:41).