



## Like A Virgin?

For the fourth week of Advent, Richard Jobs reflects further on the significance of Mary..

Those investigating the Bible for the first time are often rather underwhelmed when they realise that the first chapter of the New Testament is given over to what appears to be a rather dry genealogy. As much as we might enjoy a good family tree, this does not strike our modern sensibilities as the most rip-roaring start to the greatest story ever told.

What if that opening genealogy however contains clues that reveal just how radical this tale is? Perhaps that genealogy is key to understanding this week's reading from the same chapter in Matthew's Gospel, as Joseph ponders whether to divorce Mary in the light of her pregnancy.

The eagle-eyed will note that amongst the list of male names, there are four females, which was unheard of in the patriarchal culture of the time. Significantly, these women are tainted by possible scandal: we have Tamar (who posed as a prostitute), Rahab (an actual prostitute), Ruth (who spends the night on the threshing floor to secure a new husband) and Bathsheba (raped by David).

As Andrew T Lincoln writes, "*Matthew's point is that, if the Abrahamic and David line of descent to the Messiah was carried forward through the anomalous sexual activity involving those four women, and if indeed the very first 'son of David' who was Israel's king was the result of an adulterous relationship, then there should be no surprise if Jesus's conception and birth involved a sexual scandal in the case of Mary.*"

I take great comfort realising that God's larger story is still unfolding, even if the details often remain sordid and decidedly human. Perhaps this is the point that drives the Christmas story: God wants to move amongst the mess of our every day existence. Jesus came to liberate us, but he did that through experiencing - and fully understanding - the brokenness of our existence.

## Reflections

- How do you feel about the idea of Jesus's birth story being 'tainted by scandal'? Do you find it encouraging or unsettling?
- Has our understanding of the Christmas story become too safe?
- What does Mary mean to you and how does this shape your relationship with Jesus?
- Do you think we need to talk about Mary more in Church? Why?

## Resources

If you are searching for a well-rounded companion for the Christmas period, you cannot go wrong with Paula Gooder's Journey to the Manger (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2015). Gooder explores the various accounts of Jesus's birth (which naturally gives plenty of room to Mary), striking a perfect balance between prayerful reflections and theological rigour.

We are currently going through a purple patch of Protestant studies in Mariology. Published in October, Amy Peeler's Women and the Gender of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2022) is possibly my book of 2022. Peeler reflects deeply on the meaning of the incarnation and how this challenges our often gendered understanding of the divine. Orthodox and radical in equal measure, it will change how you think about God, Jesus and Mary. For those that cannot find time to read the whole book, Peeler's appearance on this podcast from *On Script* - Women and the Gender of God - serves as a good taster.

Matthew J. Miller's appearance on the *For the Life of the World* podcast - A Womb More Spacious Than Star - is a provocative challenge to Protestants as to the place of Mary in their faith.

For those looking for studies on Catholic Marian faith, both Brant Pitre's Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018) and Elizabeth A. Johnson, Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints (London, Continuum, 2003) are worthwhile.

During the Christmas season, Christians hear plenty about Jesus's birth without being given an opportunity to think deeply about the spiritual dimensions at play in the virginal conception. For those that do want to investigate the topic, Kyle Robert's A Complicated Pregnancy: Whether Mary was a Virgin and Why It Matters (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017) is highly readable. It will help many who struggle with what appears on the surface to be one of Christianity's most impossible claims. That author's recent appearance on the Nomad podcast - Kyle Roberts: Born of A Virgin? - provides a useful summary.

**Links to these resources are imbedded into the electronic copy. Just click on the underlined words.**