

Advent Bible Study – Little Town Big Story 2

This Advent study takes as its theme the well known carol, 'O little town of Bethlehem' written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks an Episcopal priest as a suitable carol for his Sunday School. Each study takes its theme from a verse of the carol.

Study Two 'For Christ is born of Mary'

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth

So what do we know about Mary?

Ancestors: Mary was of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of King David.

Home town: Nazareth.

Husband: Joseph.

Relations: Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias.

Children: Jesus, James (Joseph), James, Judas, and Simon. There were evidently sisters as well, but they are unnamed ([Matthew 13:55-56](#); [Mark 6:3](#)).

Mary is at the very centre of the nativity story - not just because she was the mother of Jesus, but because of the way this honour was revealed to her by God and her beautiful response in the words that we know as the Magnificat.

Elsewhere in Scripture great and important figures have unusual births which are viewed as signs pointing to their significance, such as Isaac and John the Baptist. If figures like Isaac ([Gen 17:15-21](#)) and John the Baptist ([Luke 1:57-64](#)) had miraculous births, how much more appropriate it is that the Son of God should have a miraculous birth.

Both Luke and Matthew emphasise the power of the Holy Spirit working in the circumstances of Jesus birth. In Jewish belief the Holy Spirit was the person who brought God's truth to men, empowering and teaching the prophets of old. Thus Jesus would bring God's truth to humankind and allow us to see something of the very nature of God.

Let us not be diverted into considering Mary's significance in the various Christian denominations. An outstanding example of a life dedicated to God, or the Mother of God and co-redeemer. But rather think about two aspects of the Mary's story.

What if God had not intervened?

Mary was her early teens when she was engaged to be married to Joseph and he could have divorced her on discovering she was pregnant, leaving Jesus growing up labelled illegitimate. Heavily pregnant, Mary and Joseph have to make the 80 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, what if they had been attacked, or if Mary had been taken ill en-route?

Bethlehem was a small town, packed with visitors, so the couple had to make do with the barest of shelter. There is comfort for us in knowing that Jesus was subject to the dangers of a normal human birth and infancy.

The personality of Mary

Although we know very little about Mary as a person, we can make some assumptions based upon her responses to the news that the angel brought. There is a humility in her willingness to accept this task which is very beautiful. William Barclay says 'Mary had learned to forget the world's commonest prayer - "Thy will be changed" - and to pray the world's greatest prayer - "Thy will be done."'

Born of a virgin

The traditional doctrine of the established church is the literal understanding of Luke's narrative, which describes the virgin birth, although interestingly within some Christian denominations this is one doctrine which the Church allows its members to come to their own understanding of.

Questions

1 What can we learn about Christian discipleship from the life and words of Mary?

2 Mary's role in the life and ministry of Jesus has been compared to that of John the Baptist, who was there at the beginning to point the way to Jesus and then stepped back to allow him to take centre stage. Is that a fair description of Mary's role?

3 Is the Virgin Birth something you find easy to believe in? Could you envisage God coming to earth in human form in another way?