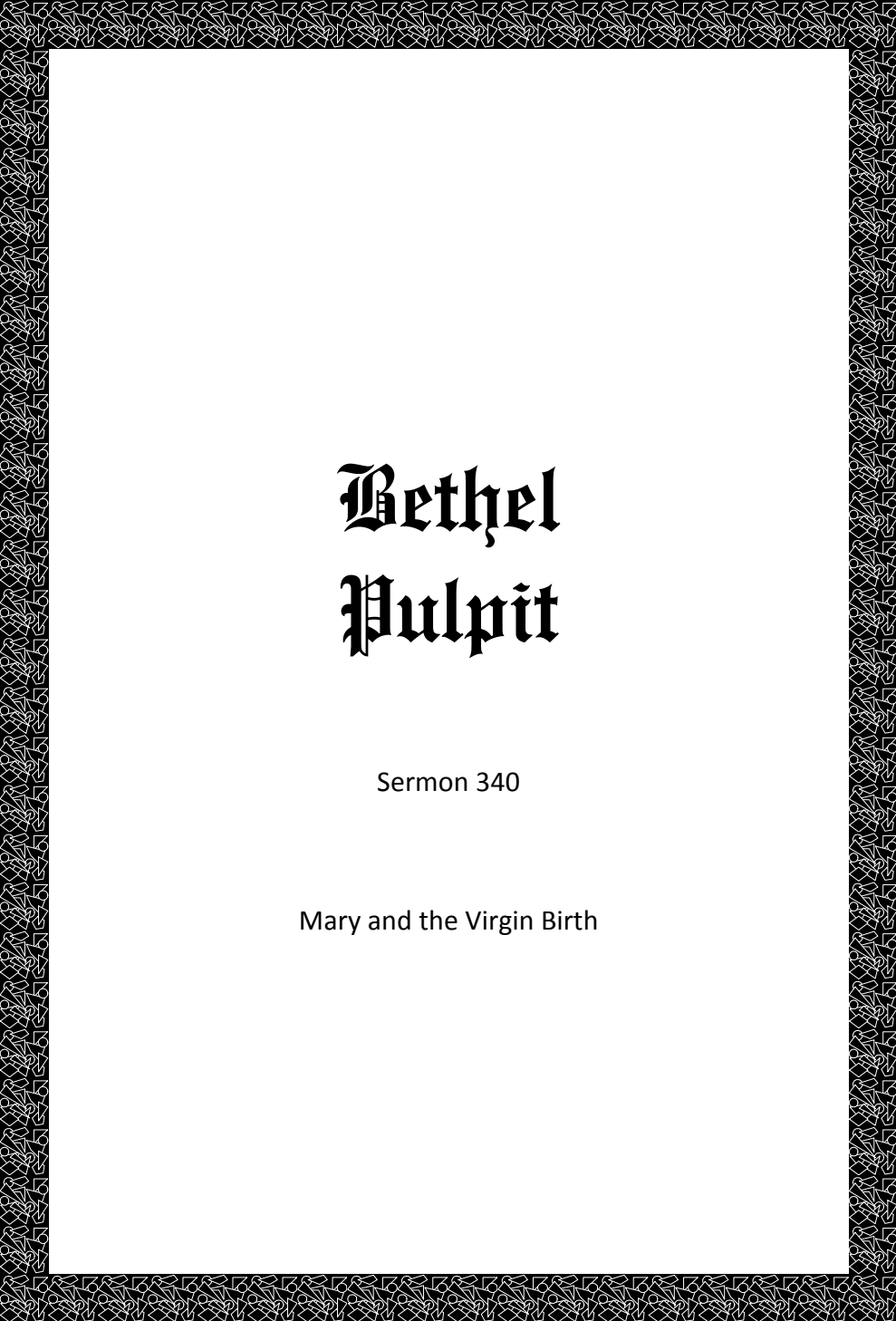




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 340

Mary and the Virgin Birth

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 16th December, 2012**

Text: “*And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her*” (Luke 1. 38).

As we come to consider the angel's visit to Mary, beloved friends, we are on holy ground. We venture with fear and trembling. “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”

I would like to say a few things first of all about Mary. I believe that there never was a more godly woman who ever lived, and she was given the greatest honour that any woman was ever given, to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Now the Roman Catholics have made far too much of her, and then I think there has been a reaction, so that perhaps we have been afraid of thinking too much of her. But how the Lord Jesus loved her, and how He honoured her, and in His agonies on the cross, some of His last words were that loving request that she should be cared for by the Apostle John!

But as there is so much about Mary wrongly believed today – mariolatry the term is – if Mary was such a godly woman, what is wrong with the Roman Catholic teaching concerning Mary? Well, two edicts from the pope have been issued, one in 1854, one in 1950, and we understand they must be believed by every Roman Catholic on pain of eternal death. The first was that Mary was born completely free from sin. They call it *The Immaculate Conception*. When you hear of the doctrine of the immaculate conception, they are not speaking of the Lord Jesus; they are speaking of Mary. Now there is no scriptural evidence for that at all. Mary was a sinner, and she knew that she was a sinner; she said, “My Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.” She needed a Saviour as much as any other of the human race.

But then the second thing, which was decreed more recently, what is known as *The Assumption*, that after Mary died, she was bodily raised from the dead and ascended and is glorified in heaven. Again, there is no shred of evidence for this at all. But the Roman church speaks of Mary as a mediator (or should the word be a mediatrix?) She comes between the

sinner and Jesus, as Jesus comes between the sinner and His Father. And so there are these many prayers to Mary, and in the rosary there are more prayers to Mary than there are to the Lord Jesus or to His Father in heaven.

Now I think it is right that we should understand these things, and of course we always stand on this same ground: it is not the Roman Catholics – we are friendly with some of them; we are sympathetic to them – but it is their erroneous doctrines which so dishonour our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and which point out a false way of salvation. So they make too much of Mary. They have almost made her into a God who has to be prayed to, who has to be worshipped. But may we ever remember what a godly, gracious, favoured woman she was. You think of this: “From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” “Thou hast found favour with God.” “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” We must never, never forget that.

So speaking to you on this very sacred subject this morning, with the Lord’s help I want to try to speak to you first of all about *the virgin birth*, how vital it is for our salvation; and then secondly, some of *these wonderful things that the angel spoke to Mary about the Lord Jesus*; and then thirdly, *this wonderful, this gracious response of Mary*: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

Now first of all, *the virgin birth*. We can never really understand it, but we believe that the Lord Jesus according to the flesh had no earthly father, but He did have an earthly mother, and though He had no earthly father, Mary was as much His mother, as much a real mother, as anyone here this morning has been a mother. “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” But in the everlasting plan of salvation in the covenant of grace, if sinners were ever to be saved, only Almighty God could do it in the Person of His Son. But He must become a Man, a real Man. Redemption could only be by death, death being required, and the Godhead could not die. Redemption must only be by blood. “Without shedding of blood is no remission.” Now the Godhead could not shed blood, so we have this wonderful revelation, the mystery of godliness, the infinite wisdom of God, how the Son of God from everlasting could become a Man, a real Man, without ever ceasing to be God, and how He could become a Man, a real Man, without there being any taint of original sin. O, “Without controversy great is the mystery of

godliness.” So we see our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, one glorious Person, but very God and very Man. As our hymnwriter puts it, “Man to suffer, God to save.”

But like Mary, we say, “How shall this be?” And we can venture no nearer than this: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” Probably it has troubled you over the years that we have that expression, “that holy Thing.” But the Word of God is always so exact in its expressions. It could not say, that holy person, because the personality of the Lord Jesus stands in His Godhead, His Person as the Son of God. His Person as the Son of God, He took our nature into union with that divine Person. His sacred, holy humanity: “that holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

Now in the early days of the Christian church, there were many vicious attacks on the Lord Jesus being truly God, and these faltered, and these failed, so Satan came with a second vicious attack, that He was never a real Man; and that up to a point seemed to succeed, and sadly this ancient error is surfacing itself at present, and has been for some years. If our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was not made a real Man, in all points like unto His brethren, yet without sin, then there is no hope for us. How we love to sing of it: “Our wonderful Lover took flesh of our flesh”! Now that is a truth that is being denied today.

Anyway, to leave these things.

“I love the Incarnate Mystery,
And there I fix my trust.”

It is a mystery and we do not understand it, but we must believe it, that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is very God and truly Man, made in all points like unto His brethren, yet without sin, and here is all our hope and all our salvation, in what He did and what He accomplished. And then He cried, “It is finished.” O but this is holy ground: “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

Now the second thing. The angel told Mary a few things about this glorious Person who was to be her Son. “Thou shalt call His name JESUS” – the first time this name was known, that it was pronounced, this name which has delighted the hearts of millions down the ages and still delights millions in heaven this morning. Later it was revealed to Joseph. “Thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins.” Doesn’t it touch your heart sometimes:

“Dearest of all the names above,
My Jesus, and my God!”

“Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son, and shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great” – great in the sight of His Father; great in the eyes of every sinner saved by grace; a great, almighty Saviour; great in His love; great in His mercy; great in His matchless condescension, for, “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich”; great in that grace which saves the vilest of sinners; great in that everlasting salvation; great in that wonderful fulness, so suitable to our every need as sinners; great in all the promises; great in the value and efficacy of His precious, sin-atoning blood; great to help; great to deliver; great to support. Doesn’t this suit you well when you feel the opposite in yourself, when you feel you are great sinners and you need a great Saviour and you need a great salvation?

“Thou ... shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great.” And especially because of who He is. “He ... shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David.” So He is going to be a King, and He was counted as a King at His birth by those who were the forerunners of the Gentile church, that is the wise men. It was revealed to them that the Babe of Bethlehem was a King. “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” It is a lovely question: “Where is He?” Perhaps we could ponder it this Christmas time. “Where is He?” It was revealed at His birth that He *was* the King, and you remember there came a time when He rode into Jerusalem to die, “That it might be fulfilled Behold, thy King cometh unto thee.” And though Pilate spoke it in scorn, he still had to say it, “Behold your King!” He still by divine appointment had to inscribe it on the cross: “JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

“He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” When we come to the Book of the Revelation, “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” If your religion and mine is real, we need the Lord Jesus as our Prophet, Priest and King. Our Prophet to teach us, that Prophet of whom Moses prophesied: “A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; Him shall ye hear.” And a Priest; a Priest to atone, to make the sacrifice, a Priest to enter heaven, ever-living, ever interceding, a Priest standing between in garments dyed in blood. A King; a King to reign in the earth. He is on the throne. He is almighty. All nations, all kings must bow to Him. He is sovereign; He is in control; He is accomplishing His purposes, and “He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

“He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” He rules in the lives of His people. He rules to overthrow all their enemies – sin, Satan, unbelief and the world. If led by the Spirit of God, you will say,

“Reign o’er us as King, accomplish Thy will,
And powerfully bring us forth from all ill.”

“He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” It is, “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” But as a King His throne is a throne of grace and His royal sceptre is a sceptre of mercy. To that venturing sinner He extends the sceptre of mercy. “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Just as Esther went in to King Ahasuerus fearing, trembling, but the golden sceptre was extended: “What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.” And so Zion’s glorious God and King, this Infant here foretold by the angel to Mary, He still sits on the throne, almighty, but His love and mercy as great as His power, and though He ever reigns to destroy His enemies, and “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision,” still He delights to extend that sceptre of love and mercy to that sinner even this morning who ventures, mercy through blood your only plea.

“He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” And as a King He sits upon a throne of

grace, and what a wonderful thing it is that as we pass from year to year, as we come to the end of another year, the throne of grace is ever there, and the promise: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

“And of His kingdom there shall be no end.” When you look around in the world, how many kingdoms have disappeared – in our lifetime, some of us. I remember when I was a young boy there were all these various kings and queens in Europe, but most of those kingdoms have now departed. We think of that wonderful prophecy made to Daniel: the stone cut out without hands that destroyed the great image of the four mighty empires: “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.” It is not a precarious throne. The Lord Jesus is there, and He ever will be there.

You remember how Isaiah had that wonderful revelation in chapter 6: “In the year that king Uzziah died.” It was a sad day for Israel. The throne of Israel was empty, vacated in sad circumstances, a godly man who dishonoured his Lord and died a leper’s death. But he was Isaiah’s friend, and Israel was mourning. “In the year that king Uzziah died,” the throne of Israel empty, he saw the everlasting throne that never can be empty. “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple.” “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.”

“And of His kingdom there shall be no end.” He gives a kingdom to His people. He says, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” He sets up a kingdom in their hearts. And what is it?

“A kingdom which can ne’er decay,
While time sweeps earthly thrones away.”

O to have the kingdom of God set up in your heart, for Christ to come to live and reign! The old divines used to speak something like this. Thousands of people would love to have Jesus as their Priest who do not want Him as their King. What did those old divines mean? Well, people would like the Lord Jesus to forgive their sins when they come to die, but they never want Him to live and reign in their hearts. If led and taught by

the Spirit of God, we shall bow before Him as our King, and we shall put the crown upon His head, because in heaven this Infant who was to be born of Mary, upon His head now are many crowns. “Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon the throne,” because He lives and reigns for ever with His beloved people in glory to all eternity.

“Thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son, and shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.” What sacred truths the angel Gabriel revealed to Mary! And may we be led by faith, and may it be to wonder and to admire and to worship.

So then this morning we have first of all the mystery of the virgin birth, and then secondly we have these glorious things that the angel revealed concerning the coming Saviour, but then we have Mary’s gracious response. “And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” I do not think a more gracious word than that was ever spoken by any sinner. Most people, rightly or wrongly have believed that Mary was probably a teenage girl. Whether there was any evidence for this, we do not know, but this down the ages seems to have been the general supposition, that she was just a teenage girl. They have their reasons for it.

When the angel came and revealed these things to her, she was completely overwhelmed, and there were so many things she could not understand, but she fell completely before the Lord. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” But it was not just that she could not understand some of these things, and it was not just that she was overwhelmed, but she had a little realisation of that life of sorrow that was before her, but she accepted it in faith and love. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” She knew she would be scorned and mocked by the people of Nazareth, expecting the holy Baby, and telling them that God was the Father. She knew that Joseph whom she was hoping to marry would be distraught. She knew she had these things immediately before her. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” But I believe she had a little glimpse of something else, and it was revealed to her shortly afterwards by

aged Simeon when he took the infant Saviour in his arms. He said, “Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.”

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” I do not believe there ever was a more gracious word in humility, in godly submission, ever spoken than this. And what a glorious example Mary is here to us! You perhaps have things in your life you do not understand. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” If it is Thy will, it must be right.

“We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see,
But all is well that’s done by Thee.”

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” Perhaps there is some way you have to walk out. Your flesh shrinks from it. “This is the way, walk ye in it.” O for that grace of submission that only the Holy Spirit of God in His love and sovereignty can give! But if the Lord calls you to walk out any pathway, if He appoints any way for you, through grace to be able to say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” What if it is sadness, and what if it is a way of trial? What if it is disappointment? What about the unknown way? We do not know what it holds, but we know that “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.” But if it is ill health, whatever the Lord has appointed – because whatever He appoints for His people, it is in love and it is in mercy, even if we do not understand these things – O but to be blessed with grace to fall at His feet in humility and in worship, and leaving everything in His hands. “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.”

“And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”