

“How can this be?” Luke chapter 1 verse 34

Some time after speaking to Zechariah the priest, the angel Gabriel visits Mary, a young woman living in the Galilean town of Nazareth. His message to her is well known. She will become pregnant and give birth to a child to whom she is to give the name Jesus. He will be the Son of God, who will reign forever.

Gabriel might have experienced a sense of Deja vu on hearing Mary's reaction. As Zechariah had asked “How can I know this?” Mary replies “How can this be?” To his credit, he shows no sign of impatience, and nor does he render Mary dumb until the child is born, as he did to Zechariah. He simply explains that the child will be conceived by the power of the holy Spirit.

We can quite understand Mary's scepticism, even with an angel of God standing in front of her. She explains it herself; “I have not had sexual relations with a man.” She is pointing out, quite reasonably, that she has not done the very thing that is necessary in order to bring about what the angel has said would happen.

One of the ways in which we can so easily limit our conception of what God can do in and through our lives is that we make it conditional on the resources and abilities we have. But God is not limited by our human frailties. Many are the people God has chosen despite clearly not being qualified for the task he has called them to. Many also are the people who God has led to faith in Christ who have seemed the most unlikely to ever embrace faith, not least the apostle Paul, who called himself “the chief of sinners” having persecuted the early church.

In any case, God is not speaking to Mary about something she will do. She is clearly not capable of spontaneously generating the conception of a child within herself. This is something God is going to do. She just has to be ready to deal with the consequences.

So her eventual response to Gabriel is to say “I am the Lord's servant. May it be done to me according to your word.” And when we get a sense that God wants to do something in or with our lives, and we perhaps question whether we are ready or qualified for it, that same response is the most appropriate one for us, too.

Prayer.

Father, may your will be done in my life. Thank you that when you take hold of our lives you do so for a reason. You have things that you want us to do and you have things you want to do in us. Help us to submit in all humility to what you want to do in us, even though it may seem to us that we are not qualified or prepared for it, and grant us the wisdom and strength to live out the consequences. In Jesus' name, amen.

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