

## Isaiah 7:14

**Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.**

Is Christmas a load of rubbish?

- Well, of course, it depends what you mean by Christmas
- I must admit to being a bit bewildered visiting shops at the end of October
- That were decorated with Christmas trimmings and playing not-so-seasonal music

If you are fed up with extravagant present-buying, forced jollity and days of cold turkey

- I would think you are in the majority of everyone of adult years
- When most of us go with what we think is the flow
- For fear of being branded a kill-joy or some kind of Ebenezer Scrooge

But here is a question is the real Christmas – not just the trimmings – a load of rubbish?

- Whatever people think about Jesus – is his inauspicious birth cause for celebration?
- After all we don't make much of the birth of other great figures from history
- And most Christians will admit that it is unlikely that Jesus was born on 25 December
- Some time in October, when shepherds are in the fields, being a more likely date

Very soon children will be practising dressing up as shepherds, angels and wise men

- Dressing gowns, tea towels, white sheets and tinsel will find a new lease of life
- Parents and grandparents will enthusiastically video the occasion
- Before stuffing a few mince pies and heading for home for a well-earned rest

Meanwhile, in church, things are not always looking that promising either

- Choirs intone songs and members read of angels and shepherds, wise men and gifts
- Only to be followed by a clergyman who, if he has anything to say at all, tells us
- that the familiar story of the angel appearing to Mary and the virgin birth is a myth

Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ, Isaiah prophesied:

Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

(Isaiah 7:14)

In the Old Testament, this is the era of the divided kingdom

- Israel in the north had broken away from the Jerusalem King
- Making its capital at Samaria, and after a succession of unrighteous Kings
- Israel will fall to the Assyrian Empire
- Judah in the south had remained loyal to the King at Jerusalem
- Isaiah has been called by God to be his prophet at Jerusalem
- From the death of King Uzziah onwards, Judah had gone downhill rapidly
- Uzziah was succeeded as king by his son, Jotham
- Jotham was succeeded by his son, Ahaz, who was one of the worst kings of Judah
- And yet it is to Ahaz that the sign of Immanuel is given

The political situation facing Judah at the time of King Ahaz is not promising

- Ahaz's reign covers not quite two decades which were crucial and testing times
- The great threat to Judah was the expansion of the Assyrian Empire
- At the beginning of the reign of Ahaz, Aram and Israel carried the flag of resistance
- But during the course of his reign
- they and others were destroyed, deported, and assimilated
- in these gloomy times, the promised sign (Isaiah 7:14)
- of the birth of an heir for David, is given through the prophet Isaiah
- but the really big question for us is – does this have anything at all to do with Jesus?

At the time of the prophecy, Ahaz has inherited a difficult situation

- the dominant power in the Middle East was Assyria
- and Judah, having no real choice against Assyria's military might, was a vassal state
- meaning that Judah cooperated with Assyria and made periodic 'gifts' and 'tributes'
- it was really little more than 'protection money'

Through the prophecy, God offered Ahaz confirmation that all these events are in his will

- in v. 11 the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 'ask the LORD your God for a sign'
- fearful that such a request might be misinterpreted as putting God to the test
- Ahaz is unwilling to ask God for a sign
- Therefore, if Ahaz will not ask for a sign, of God's faithfulness to his promises
- God will give a sign to the whole House of David (v. 13)
- This gives the entire passage a royal significance, for it relates to the promises given
- God had promised that the throne of David would last for ever
- The one who would come to the throne would be the Messiah
- The sign is revealed in vv. 14-17

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah - he will bring the king of Assyria.

(Isaiah 7:14-17)

This is a notoriously difficult and controversial verse of scripture

- It is the announcement of a birth – and such announcements normally have details
- If a mother is going to have a child - who is the mother?
- Who is the child? And, to be fair, who is the father?
- And yet the sign is simple enough
- A young woman, not yet married (that is presently still a virgin)
- Will in due course bear a child and call his name Immanuel meaning God is with us
- By the time the child is old enough to make decisions
- The land of two opposing kings will be devastated
- By which time the present crisis will no longer be so acute or relevant

## I THE FIRST FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE OF GOD

The sign of the child shows that despite all the circumstances that Ahaz and Judah faced

- The all-sovereign and all-knowing God has the situation completely in hand
- It was a promise not simply to Ahaz but to all the people (the house of David)
- There is no suggestion that the prophecy was a riddle to those who first heard it
- The sign is specifically a birth (the assurance of an heir to the throne)
- And a name (the assurance of God's faithfulness to his promise – to be 'with' them)
- The announcement continues with the description of the child's well-being (v. 15)
- The context of the prophecy requires that the sign will be fulfilled soon
- While the child is still a small boy ... the land will be laid waste (v. 16)
- And the threats from Aram and Israel (vv. 1-2) will not happen
- From the text we must ask two critical questions
- Who is the mother? And who is the child?

Although we cannot be certain, we would expect such a child to be a royal prince

- If that is the case perhaps the mother will be the queen
- We know that at about that time a princess had just entered the household of Ahaz
- Possibly Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah, a friend of the prophet (2 Kings 18:2)
- And perhaps the child was Hezekiah, one of Judah's great reforming kings
- Even that explanation is not without its problems
- Perhaps the reference is simply to an unmarried young woman within the royal house
- Who would shortly marry and later give birth to a son – called Immanuel
- In any event, God undoubtedly promised to be with the sons of David in a special way

But now we get to the really vexed question

- The Old Testament (including Isaiah) was written in Hebrew
- The Hebrew word (Heb. *Almah*) that NIV and AV translates 'virgin'
- Is somewhat ambiguous could simply mean 'young woman' (RSV, Good News)
- This has caused some to conclude that this prophecy relates just to Ahaz's reign
- The Greek translation of the Old Testament – often called the Septuagint (LXX)
- Translates the Heb. *Almah* (which is ambiguous, meaning virgin or young woman)
- By the unambiguous word '*parthenos*' ('virgin')
- And it is this translation that Matthew quotes when he says:

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" - which means, "God with us."  
(Matthew 1:22-23)

Now the sceptic will say that Matthew knew of this verse and invented a virgin birth story

- But the traditional believer can point out that both Matthew and Luke have this story
- So it is possible to interpret the prophecy like this
- The prophecy had a first fulfilment in the reign of King Ahaz
- And in those circumstances the ambiguous word simply meant 'young woman'
- But the prophecy had a second fulfilment much later
- And in those circumstances the ambiguous word meant 'virgin'

## II THE SECOND FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE OF GOD

This interpretation does full justice to the language of Isaiah

- And at the same time to Matthew's application of the prophecy to Christ
- The Isaiah prophecy is a double reference
- Both to Ahaz that the mother is a royal contemporary of his and the prophet
- Whose child's name would symbolise the presence of God with his people
- With Ahaz being given the assurance that the alliance against him would be destroyed
- And to the house of David as a whole, that the Messiah would come
- By the birth of a child who would not symbolise the presence of God with his people
- But who would be the very presence of God with his people
- The child at the time of Ahaz would foreshadow the Messiah
- In whom God would be incarnate

Interestingly enough, the verse from Isaiah has the definite article

- It is not 'a virgin or young woman' but 'the virgin or young woman'
- New Testament writers quite often use verses separate from their immediate contexts
- So that Old Testament texts were understood to have mysterious meanings
- So that Matthew rightly attaches the text to Mary the mother of Jesus
- And shows that the virgin birth of Jesus is a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah

It seems permissible at even the highest levels of the church for people to be sceptical

- About all the traditional Christian doctrines
- And we are familiar with those who question the doctrine of the virgin birth
- A common objection is that the Apostle Paul did not speak of the virgin birth
- To be fair this is true, but he frequently asserts the divinity of Jesus in his writing
- Calling him, 'the Son of God'

If Jesus had both a mortal father and mother

- One would expect him to explain how he could be God
- This has caused some people to conclude that Paul took the virgin birth for granted
- To the criticism that Paul didn't speak of Jesus' virgin birth
- Therefore one can conclude he did not know of it or believe in it
- One could appropriately reply that Paul didn't speak of Jesus' birth at all
- Yet that scarcely convinces us that Paul did not believe Jesus had any kind of birth

We are not going to get very far with arguments from silence

- Recent scholars of the infancy narratives have argued
- That the theological significance of Jesus' birth did not concern Christians until later
- So that, in effect, the early church worked backwards on its theology
- First it focused on the death and resurrection of Christ (Paul's letters)
- Then on his life (Mark's Gospel), and later still on his birth (Matthew and Luke)

The suggestion that the gospels borrowed from pagan myths for accounts of the virgin birth

- Is not new, but the gospel stories are unique as the father does not take human form
- No New Testament writer ever refers to Jesus simply as the son of Joseph
- The story does not appear to be either a Jewish or pagan legend

All this points to:

### III THE THIRD FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE OF GOD

It is a characteristic of Isaiah to introduce a theme relating to the Messiah

- But for the prophecy to be capable of a second level of interpretation
- In the reign of King Ahaz, Isaiah predicted the coming of a boy
- Who would be a sign from God to his contemporaries
- And who would foreshadow Christ
- In whom the word of prophecy, separate from its historical situation
- Would be a far greater fulfilment of the prophet's word

That the Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin and had no earthly father

- Has been accepted by all Christians from the earliest times
- The divinity of Jesus was expressed in the name
- And the virgin birth expresses how the incarnation took place

The key issue in the gospels is always – who is this Jesus?

- Christians do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God because he was born of a virgin
- But we believe that he was born of a virgin
- Because we believe on other grounds that he is the Son of God
- If we believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God
- Not only is there sufficient evidence from the Bible for his virgin birth
- But also it is more difficult to believe that he was begotten by an earthly father
- Than he was born of a virgin mother

So as not to be too pedantic I have freely used the expression 'virgin birth'

- Most Protestants say 'virgin birth' when what we mean is 'virginal conception'
- The real difficulty that prevents some people from believing in this
- Is not because of the difficulties of the Old Testament prophecies
- Or the difficulties of the New Testament nativity stories
- And to be fair there are some
- The real difficulty that prevents people from believing in the virgin birth
- Is that they do not believe in a God who intervenes in human history
- But to abandon the belief that God intervenes in human history
- Is to abandon belief in the incarnation

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

Abandoning belief in the incarnation seems to me to be abandoning Christianity altogether

- The incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension
- Are the four fundamentals of the gospel message – three of these are supernatural
- If we believe in a God who intervenes in history, then he is the God of the miraculous
- And all the other miracle stories take their place alongside the fundamentals

Every child born of human parents is a new person

- Jesus Christ was not a new person, but the eternal Son of God
- It seems to have been for this reason that he was born without a human father
- Taking to himself human nature in order to be our Saviour and Redeemer
- Jesus was fully human like us, but without any tendency to sin
- Which theologians call 'original sin' – in other words
- It was from 'original' and 'actual' sin that Jesus came to set us free
- It is hard to see how Jesus could have been free from it
- Without the extraordinary circumstances of his birth
- Jesus was fully human like Adam – in other words a Second Adam

It is in this capacity that Jesus can be the representative head of the human race

- It is this I take to be the third fulfilment of the promise of God
- God promised a type of Messiah to Ahaz – a promise of God's presence
- God promised the Messiah to the House of David – the reality of God's presence
- God gives the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to us today – to be our Lord and our Saviour

There are millions of people to whom the nativity story means no more than the Ahaz story

- As Christmas comes around they will share in the annual rituals
- extravagant present-buying, forced jollity and days of cold turkey
- For fear of being branded a kill-joy or some kind of Ebenezer Scrooge
- They will watch children dressing up as shepherds, angels and wise men
- In dressing gowns, tea towels, white sheets and tinsel

Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

(Isaiah 7:14)

Is Christmas a load of rubbish?

- No, for the Lord who was faithful to his promises to Judah
- The first fulfilment of the promise of God
- Is faithful to his promises to all the house of David
- And has come to be 'God with us' in Jesus
- The second fulfilment of the promise of God

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

(Galatians 4:4-6)

This is Jesus, Lord, King, Saviour, Messiah

- The third fulfilment of the promise of God