

Nothing will be impossible with God

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[0 : 00] So please don't turn up in the next two weeks because there will be no one here. Now we're going to pray. He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all.

Father, we thank you for that event. Not just one event among many events, but an event which has transformed history. All the time before that we call before Christ, and all the time since is the year of our Lord.

We praise you indeed that he was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew. He became one of us, without ceasing to be one with God.

And it is this birth, and not just this birth, but the life and the death and the resurrection and the coming again that we celebrate at Christmas. And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above.

So bless us this Christmas. Bless us as we meet with family and friends. Bless us as we gather round tables to eat together. And we pray that in all the festivities, in all the enjoyment, that we will not forget what it is all about.

[1 : 26] It is not ultimately about any of these things. It is about the fact that the word became flesh and lived among us. That Emmanuel, God's presence and his very self, came down to earth in order to live among us and to die for us.

We pray for those who this Christmas will find the time desolate and lonely. Those who are sad. Those who are in despair. Those who are grieving.

Those who have made a mess of their lives as they feel. And we pray that the one who came into the world of Bethlehem may come into all our hearts and lives.

Be with us. Change us. And stay with us. Not just throughout the season of Christmas. But throughout the days and months and years that follow. And bless us now as we continue to read your word.

To praise your name. And to listen to what that word has to say to us. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now we've got two readings today.

[2 : 32] Our first reading, which is on the inset, is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 1 to 4. Our main reading is also from Luke, chapter 1. But I want to read this passage because Luke makes it very plain in these verses.

What he's doing, what he's writing about in the stories that follow. So this is what Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel. Luke writes, See what Luke is saying here.

Luke is saying, first of all, he says, I'm writing history. This is not myth. This is not legend. This is not fantasy. It's history. And secondly, it's reliable history.

Where does he get it from? My witnesses and ministers of the word. So Luke sits down to write this great Gospel. He's saying to the people who first read it and to us now, this is history.

This really happened. And this is the way that it was given to us. Now we're going to have another reading, which is on the other side of that inset sheet, where Luke tells us about the announcement of Mary.

[4 : 10] In the verses just before this, Luke has told us how a couple called Elizabeth and Zechariah have been told that they are going to have a child.

That child is going to be John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. And Elizabeth has been pregnant for five months. So that's why the reference here to the sixth month.

So let's read this. Luke 1, 26 to 38. In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David.

And the virgin's name was Mary. And Gabriel came to her and said, Greetings, O favored one. The Lord is with you. But Mary was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

[5 : 21] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

And the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. Amen. May God bless to us that reading from his word.

[6 : 27] For nothing will be impossible with God. That rises suspicion right away, doesn't it? Luke has said he's writing history.

But what he's writing here sounds more like fantasy. More like what the White Queen said in Alice in Wonderland. I can sometimes believe six impossible things before breakfast.

Or the kind of fantasy I entertain that my team might win the cup. If I tell you I support Newcastle United, you'll understand what I mean when I say that's a fantasy. But Luke has emphasised that this is not legend.

It is not myth. And if you read, when you go home, read the whole of Luke 1 and 2. And see how Luke places everything within a precise time frame.

In the days of Herod the King, for example, in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel came. Now in fantasy stories, you don't usually have precise notes of time like in the sixth month.

[7 : 33] What's happening here is not fantasy. What's happening here is a series of events whose echo is going to run down the corridors of history and right into eternity.

For nothing will be impossible with God. People often say things can't change. Nothing will get any better. Here they did. And they changed everything forever.

Now I'm going to look at this passage under really two headings. First of all, there is a political impossibility. Nothing will be impossible, says Gabriel.

Look what Gabriel says in verse 32. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end. Nothing will be impossible. But in political terms, everything is impossible.

[8 : 33] Gabriel's words must have seemed crazy. No one had reigned on David's throne for nearly 600 years. Indeed, there hadn't been a throne for nearly 600 years.

For all that time, this humiliated, conquered, downtrodden little province of Judah ruled in turn by Babylon, Persia, Greece and now Rome.

And into that Gabriel comes with his breathtaking promise. The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Notice how breathtaking this is. Gabriel doesn't say make the best of it. Keep your heads down. It could be worse. What he does is he points to a new kingdom.

A kingdom where Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, America, Britain, Russia, China, all these kingdoms are only of passing significance. See, God's promises are unbreakable.

[9 : 31] David had been dead and gone for nearly a thousand years. It's a long time. But the real history of the world is God's history. And God is about to enter time and space.

David's greater son is about to be born. And as David's son grows up to manhood, as he preaches the kingdom of God, as he heals those who are sick, as he raises the dead, he anticipates that kingdom which will one day fill the earth.

Indeed, the rest of the New Testament is the beginning of that story, of how that kingdom will one day fill the earth, how it will spread far and wide. Read the letter to the Romans.

And in chapter 15 there, Paul, so this is Paul is saying, remember these old prophecies about the heir of David's throne reigning over the world. Well, he says that's happening now.

And how is it happening? As men and women throughout the world give the allegiance of their hearts and their lives to David's greater son. Then that kingdom is growing.

[10:38] And finally, in the book of Revelation, the son of David, who is described as the lion of the tribe of Judah, takes the scroll of history and pronounces judgments on history.

This was true in the world that Jesus was born. True in the world of Augustus Caesar. True in our world of politics, politics of finance. And true in a world where I think once again we are recognizing our vulnerability.

Remember the ash cloud of a few months ago that paralyzed air traffic throughout the world. A year ago, the country was gripped in snow almost as severe as this.

And we wonder if it will ever thaw. Let me read to you from C.S. Lewis, from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In a countryside, in a land where snow is raining, where the white witch seems to be in control.

And this is what happened. There was no trace of the fog now. The sky became bluer and bluer and now there were white clouds hurrying across it from time to time.

[11:50] In the wide glades there were primroses. The larches and birches were covered with green. The laburnums with gold. Wouldn't it be wonderful? As the travelers walked under them, the light also became green.

This is no thaw, said the dwarf, suddenly stopping. This is spring. What are we to do, he says to the white witch.

Your winter has been destroyed, I tell you. This is Aslan's doing. This is no romantic fantasy. This is Aslan's doing.

We know, of course, that one day the snow will disappear, one day the sun will shine brightly again. You see, that's not just, that's just an anticipation of what will happen when the sun shines in splendor, when the son of David reigns over the whole world.

Every knee bows and every tongue confesses that he is Lord, for nothing will be impossible with God. No politics, no financiers, no power ever that has been or ever will be can prevent that.

[13:07] Nothing will be impossible with God. Though there is a political impossibility, there is also now a physical impossibility. Verse 31, the angel said, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will call his name Jesus.

Look at verse 34, Mary said to the angel, how will this be since I am a virgin? Now Mary realised, as any girl would have realised, that she could not possibly have a child.

You see, it's often said, when we take the story of the virgin birth, people often say, in the old days, people were naive and gullible. They believed stories about virgin births, about resurrection, about walking on the water, about healing.

We are sophisticated. Now the point, of course, is Mary and Joseph knew just as well as any of us in the 21st century that young women do not have babies unless there is a man involved.

It's no easier, in other words, for Mary to believe or for Joseph to believe than it was for us. It was, apparently, a physical impossibility. So what's happening?

[14:23] The key to what's happening is in verse 35, this tremendous verse. Gabriel answered her, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

The power of the Most High will overshadow you. Two significant places in the Old Testament where the story begins, that word occurs.

First of all, it occurs at the creation story itself where the Holy Spirit overshadows the dark, chaos waters and brings light and life and the world out of this chaos.

Perhaps even more significantly, as the people of God travelled through the desert, they carried with them the Ark of the Covenant. This wooden box covered with gold in which were the tablets of the law.

[15:28] The place where God met with his people. the place where God's glory overshadowed. Now, do you see what Luke is saying?

Luke is saying Mary is going to become the Ark of the Covenant herself, bearing the glory of God who one day, of course, is to grow up.

One day is to be the light of the world. So you see what Gabriel is saying. Gabriel is saying this is impossible if you leave God out of the story. This is impossible if you forget the story you've heard

before.

You know, often we don't give to Mary the respect and honour she deserves. So terrified of mariolatry, which of course is wrong. Mary was a sinner. We know that from the Magnificat. She says, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. She was not infallible. She was not impeccable. Nevertheless, she was a woman who deserves to be honoured.

[16:30] She carried the word of life. It was her body that was the vehicle for the glory of God. It was from her body that Jesus was born.

It was her home he grew up in and her love and care were his first earthly experiences. This young girl is to become the bearer of the Saviour, Jesus, Jesus the Lord.

So you see, something truly astonishing is happening. The Holy Spirit is breaking into human history. But while it's astonishing, while it's new, it's been anticipated already in the earlier parts of the story.

This is what God does. God isn't just living across leagues of super space. God comes right down into the story. So it is a virgin birth.

Truly, truly wonderful. Truly an action of God. But the other thing to remember is it is a truly human birth as well. I say this and I say it with awe and trembling.

[17:42] Had we been in the lowly cattle shed when Mary gave birth to the Saviour of the world, we wouldn't have seen anything different from when any mother gives birth to a child.

This was a real baby. He was little, weak, and helpless. Tears and smiles like us he knew. This is the great mystery of Christmas, the great mystery of the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ became one of us without ceasing to be one with God.

He became something he had never been before without ceasing to be who he always was. You see, even in ordinary births, if you like, the human, the man, is only a carrier, isn't he?

Only an instrument. We cannot create life. Even when people try to create it in test tubes, you don't fill a test tube with air and then wave your hand and life emerges.

I'm not talking now about the ethics of test tube babies. I'm simply talking about the fact that we cannot create. Only God can give life.

[18:55] What God does here is he, if you like, bypasses the human instrument and directly produces that life in Mary's womb. Actually interesting to think, chilling to think in some ways, that had Elizabeth and Mary been around now.

They both have been advised not to have the child. Elizabeth, because she was too old and Mary, because she was an unmarried mother. The sacredness of human life is so, so important and it's illustrated by this birth.

Law within a manger lies, as we'll sing in a few moments, he who built the starry skies. That's what's happening here. And we must look at this birth, as I say, as the culmination of the whole story up to now.

We so often get this wrong when we sentimentalise Christmas. There's always a crop of silly stories around Christmas. A few years ago, when I was living and working in England, I remember reading, seeing the headline, Dottie Vicar Tells Children that Santa Claus's Sleigh Will Have Red Hot Axles. Now the poor guy, I think, was trying to show to the children that Santa Claus wasn't real, but I think unfortunately the Lord hadn't over-endowed him with a sense of humour, and he went in this laboured way, he was telling about the red hot axles.

[20:20] He might have got away with it, but unfortunately for him, in his congregation was the television personality, Ulrika Johnson, who then told the local press, Christmas is about children, and he's spoiling it for them.

Well, be that as it may, Christmas is not about children in that sense, Christmas is about this child who changes history, this child who is one with God and becomes one of us, this child who changes everything.

In John Milton's poem, The Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity, Milton imagines the pagan gods terrified, fleeing from the child who is born.

He talks about the pagan gods, Moloch, Osiris, and all the others, and he writes, They feel from Judah's land, the dreaded infant's hand, the rays of Bethlehem blind their dusky eyes, our babe to show his godhead true, can any swaddling bands control the damned crew.

He's not just going to rule over politics and over the world, he is going to rule over the dark powers, the principalities and powers, he is going to fulfill that ancient promise, the descendant of the

woman will bruise the head of the serpent.

[21 : 38] Mary then is faced with two impossibilities, isn't she? A political one and a physical one. What's she going to do about it? Let's not ignore verse 38, the last verse in our reading.

Nothing will have been so, and Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word. Think of the faith of this young Jewish girl, probably just in her teens. She gave this astonishing message from an angel, she is to bear the saviour of the world, she has these apparent impossibilities, but she is prepared to trust God and to believe in God. It would be a wonderful thing if we all were like Mary this Christmas, if we all put our lives and our hopes and our fears, everything that lies ahead of us into the hands of God.

I want you to notice also verse 36, Behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, this is the sixth month with her who was called Barn. It's how Gabriel is reassuring Mary.

[22 : 50] Here's another impossibility, but this has been overcome by the power of God. and also the tenderness of Gabriel realizing that both Mary and Elizabeth would need support and as Mary came to terms with this astonishing and world changing, not just her own world, but the whole world changing experience, then these two women would be able to help and support each and that's our God, up there and down here, our God who controls the spiral nebula and the great galaxies and comes right down into the manger.

That's what Christmas is about, for nothing will be impossible with God. Amen.