

Historic Commentary

(Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 1:26-38 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Luke 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Venerable Bede](#): Now Gabriel means “strength of God.” Rightly he shone forth with such a name, since by his testimony he bore witness to the coming birth of God in the flesh. The prophet said this in the psalm, “The Lord strong and powerful, the Lord powerful in battle”—that battle, undoubtedly, in which he [Christ] came to fight “the powers of the air” and to snatch the world from their tyranny.

[Venerable Bede](#): Truly full of grace was she, upon whom it was conferred by divine favor that, first among women, she should offer God the most glorious gift of her virginity. Hence she who strove to imitate the life of an angel was rightfully worthy to enjoy the experience of seeing and speaking with an angel. Truly full of grace was she to whom it was granted to give birth to Jesus Christ, the very one through whom grace and truth came. And so the Lord was truly with her whom he first raised up from earthly to heavenly desires, in an unheard of love of chastity, and afterwards sanctified, by means of his human nature, with all the fullness of his divinity. Truly blessed among women was she who without precedent in the womanly state rejoiced in having the honor of parenthood along with the beauty of virginity, inasmuch as it was fitting that a virgin mother bring forth God the Son.

[Ambrose](#): And, therefore, he who had undertaken to prove the incorrupt mystery of the incarnation thought it fruitless to pursue evidence of Mary's virginity, lest he be seen as a defender of the Virgin rather than an advocate of the mystery. Surely, when he taught that Joseph was righteous, he adequately declared that he could not violate the temple of the Holy Spirit, the mother of the Lord, the womb of the mystery. We have learned the lineage of the Truth. We have learned its counsel. Let us learn its mystery. Fittingly is she espoused, but virgin, because she prefigures the church which is undefiled yet wed. A virgin conceived us of the Spirit, a Virgin brings us forth without travail. And thus perhaps Mary, wed to one, was filled by Another, because also the separate churches are indeed filled by the Spirit and by grace and yet are joined to the appearance of a temporal Priest.

Origen: The angel greeted Mary with a new address, which I could not find anywhere else in Scripture. I ought to explain this expression briefly. The angel says, “Hail, full of grace.” ... I do not remember having read this word elsewhere in Scripture. An expression of this kind, “Hail, full of grace,” is not addressed to a male. This greeting was reserved for Mary alone.

Ambrose: Learn of character from the Virgin. Learn of modesty from the Virgin. Learn of prophecy from the Virgin. Learn in the mystery.

Venerable Bede: The first cause of human perdition occurred when a serpent was sent by the devil to a woman who was to be deceived by the spirit of pride. Moreover, the devil himself came in the serpent, who, once he had deceived our first parents, stripped humankind of the glory of immortality. Because death made its entrance through a woman, it was fitting that life return through a woman. The one, seduced by the devil through the serpent, brought a man the taste of death. The other, instructed by God through the angel, produced for the world the Author of salvation.

Venerable Bede: We should carefully note the order of the words here, and the more firmly they are engrafted in our heart, the more evident it will be that the sum total of our redemption consists in them. For they proclaim with perfect clarity that the Lord Jesus, that is, our Savior, was both the true Son of God the Father and the true Son of a mother who was a human being. “Behold,” he says, “you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son”—acknowledge that this true human being assumed the true substance of flesh from the flesh of the Virgin! “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High”—confess too that this same Son is true God of true God, coeternal Son forever of the eternal Father!

John the Monk: Wonder! God is come among humanity; he who cannot be contained is contained in a womb; the timeless enters time, and great mystery: his conception is without seed, his emptying past telling! So great is this mystery! For God empties himself, takes flesh and is fashioned as a creature, when the angel tells the pure Virgin of her conception: “Rejoice, you who are full of grace; the Lord who has great mercy is with you!”

Venerable Bede: The time had come when, having redeemed the world through his blood, he was to be acknowledged as king not of the house of David alone but also of the whole church; moreover, that he was maker and governor of all generations. Hence the angel properly said afterwards, “and the Lord God will give him the seat of David his father,” and he immediately added, “and he will reign in the house of Jacob forever.” Now the house of Jacob refers to the universal church, which through its faith in and confession of Christ pertains to the heritage of the patriarchs—either among those who took their physical origin from the stock of the patriarchs or among those who, though brought forth with respect to the flesh from other countries, were reborn in Christ by the spiritual washing.

Leo the Great: But the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ exceeds all understanding and goes beyond any precedent.

Theophanes: Theotokos: Make plain to me, how I, a virgin, shall bear him?

The angel: You seek to know from me the manner of your conceiving, Virgin, but this is beyond all interpretation! The Holy Spirit will overshadow you in his creative power and shall make this come to pass!

Theotokos: When she accepted the suggestion of the serpent, my mother Eve was banished from divine delight. Therefore I fear your strange greeting, for I take care that I not slip.

The angel: I am sent as God's messenger to disclose the divine will to you. Why are you afraid of me, undefiled one? I rather am afraid of you! Why do you stand in awe of me, O lady, who stand in reverent awe of you?

Leo the Great: Each one is a partaker of this spiritual origin in regeneration. To everyone, when he is reborn, the water of baptism is like the Virgin's womb, for the same Holy Spirit fills the font, who filled the Virgin, that the sin, which that sacred conception overthrew, may be taken away by this mystical washing.

Augustine: The first sinner, the first transgressor, begot sinners liable to death. To heal them, the Savior came from the Virgin; because he didn't come to you the way you came, seeing that he did not originate from the sexual appetite of male and female, not from that chain of lust. The Holy Spirit, it says, will come upon you. That was said to the Virgin glowing with faith, not seething with carnal lust. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Being overshadowed like that, how could she be seething with the heat of sexual desire? So, because he didn't come to you the way you came, he sets you free.

Ephrem the Syrian: It was fitting that the Architect of the works of creation should come and raise up the house that had fallen and that the hovering Spirit should sanctify the buildings that were unclean. Thus, if the Progenitor entrusted the judgment that is to come to his Son, it is clear that he accomplished the creation of humanity and its restoration through him as well. He was the live coal, which had come to kindle the briars and thorns. He dwelt in the womb and cleansed it and sanctified the place of the birth pangs and the curses.⁴² The flame, which Moses saw, was moistening the bush and distilling the fat lest it be inflamed. The likeness of refined gold could be seen in the bush, entering into the fire but without being consumed. This happened so that it might make known that living fire which was to come at the end, watering and moistening the womb of the Virgin and clothing it like the fire that enveloped the bush.

Theophanes: The angel: Rejoice, lady; rejoice, most pure virgin! Rejoice, God-containing vessel! Rejoice, candlestick of the light, the restoration of Adam and the deliverance of Eve! Rejoice, holy mountain, shining sanctuary! Rejoice, bridal chamber of immortality!

Theotokos: The descent of the Holy Spirit has purified my soul; it has sanctified my body; it has made me a temple containing God, a divinely adorned tabernacle, a living sanctuary and the pure mother of life.

The angel: I see you as a lamp with many lights; a bridal chamber made by God! Spotless maiden, as an ark of gold, receive now the giver of the law, who through you has been pleased to deliver humankind's corrupted nature!

John of Damascus: And through the invocation the overshadowing power of the Holy Ghost becomes a rainfall for this new cultivation. For just as all things whatsoever God made he made by the operation of the Holy Ghost, so also it is by the operation of the Spirit that these things are done which surpass nature and cannot be discerned except by faith alone. "How shall this be done to me," asked the blessed Virgin, "because I know not a man?" The archangel Gabriel answered, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you." And now you ask how the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine and water the blood of Christ. And I tell you that the Holy Ghost comes down and works these things which are beyond description and understanding.

Irenaeus: So the Lord now manifestly came to his own. Born by his own created order that he himself bears, he by his obedience on the tree renewed and reversed what was done by disobedience in connection with a tree. The power of that seduction by which the virgin Eve, already betrothed to a man, had been wickedly seduced was broken when the angel in truth brought good tidings to the Virgin Mary, who already by her betrothal belonged to a man. For as Eve was seduced by the word of an angel to flee from God, having rebelled against his Word, so Mary by the word of an angel received the glad tidings that she would bear God by obeying his Word. The former was seduced to disobey God and so fell, but the latter was persuaded to obey God, so that the Virgin Mary might become the advocate of Eve. As the human race was subjected to death through the act of a virgin, so was it saved by a virgin was precisely balanced by the obedience of another. Then indeed the sin of the first formed man was amended by the chastisement of the First Begotten, the wisdom of the serpent was conquered by the simplicity of the dove, and the chains were broken by which we were in bondage to death.

John Calvin:

Vs 26. Now in the sixth month

It was a wonderful dispensation of the divine purpose, and far removed from the ordinary judgment of men, that God determined to make the beginning of the generation of the herald more illustrious than that of his own Son. The prophecy respecting John was published in the temple and universally known: Christ is promised to a virgin in an obscure town of Judea, and this prophecy remains buried in the breast of a young woman. But it was proper that, even from the birth of Christ, that saying should be fulfilled, "it pleased God by foolishness to save them that believe," (1 Corinthians 1:21.) The treasure of this mystery was committed by him to a virgin in such a manner, that at length, when the proper time came, it might be communicated to all the godly. It was, I own, a mean kind of guardianship; but whether for trying the humility of faith, or restraining the pride of the ungodly, it was the best adapted. Let us learn, even when the reason does not immediately appear, to submit modestly to God, and let us not be ashamed to receive instruction from her who carried in her womb Christ the eternal "wisdom of God," (1 Corinthians 1:24.) There is nothing which we should more carefully avoid than the proud contempt that would deprive us of the knowledge of the inestimable secret, which God

has purposely “hid from the wise and prudent, and revealed” to the humble and “to babes,” (Luke 10:21.)

It was, I think, for the same reason that he chose a virgin betrothed to a man. There is no foundation for Origen’s opinion, that he did this for the purpose of concealing from Satan the salvation which he was preparing to bestow on men. The marriage was a veil held out before the eyes of the world, that he who was commonly “supposed to be the son of Joseph” (Luke 3:23) might at length be believed and acknowledged by the godly to be the Son of God. Yet the entrance of Christ into the world was not destitute of glory; for the splendor of his Godhead was manifested from the commencement by his heavenly Father. Angels announced that “a Savior was born,” (Luke 2:11;) but their voice was only heard by the shepherds, and traveled no farther. One miracle, – everywhere published by “the wise men who came from the east,” (Matthew 2:1) that they had seen a star which proclaimed the birth of the Highest King, – may have been highly celebrated. Yet we see how God kept his Son, as it were, in concealment, until the time of his full manifestation arrived, and then erected for him a platform, that he might be beheld by all.

Vs 28. Hail, thou who hast obtained favor

The angel’s commission being of an astonishing and almost incredible description, he opens it with a commendation of the grace of God. And certainly, since our limited capacities admit too slender a portion of knowledge for comprehending the vast greatness of the works of God, our best remedy is, to elevate them to meditation on his boundless grace. A conviction of the Divine goodness is the entrance of faith, and the angel properly observes this order, that, after preparing the heart of the virgin by meditation on the grace of God, he may enlarge it to receive an incomprehensible mystery. For the participle *κεχαριτωμένη*, which Luke employs, denotes the undeserved favor of God. This appears more clearly from the Epistle to the Ephesians, (1:6,) where, speaking of our reconciliation to God, Paul says, God “hath made us accepted (*ἐχαρίτωσεν*) in the Beloved:” that is, he has received into his favor, and embraced with kindness, us who were formerly his enemies.

The angel adds, the Lord is with thee. To those on whom he has once bestowed his love God shows himself gracious and kind, follows and “crowns them with loving-kindness,” (Psalm 103:4.) Next comes the third clause, that she is blessed among women. Blessing is here put down as the result and proof of the Divine kindness. The word Blessed does not, in my opinion, mean, Worthy of praise; but rather means, Happy. Thus, Paul often supplicates for believers, first “grace” and then “peace,” (Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:2,) that is, every kind of blessings; implying that we shall then be truly happy and rich, when we are beloved by God, from whom all blessings proceed. But if Mary’s happiness, righteousness, and life, flow from the undeserved love of God, if her virtues and all her excellence are nothing more than the Divine kindness, it is the height of absurdity to tell us that we should seek from her what she derives from another quarter in the same manner as ourselves.

Vs 30. Fear not, Mary

He bids her lay aside fear. Let us always remember – what arises from the weakness of the

flesh—that, whenever the feeblest ray of the Divine glory bursts upon us, we cannot avoid being alarmed. When we become aware, in good earnest, of the presence of God, we cannot think of it apart from its effects. Accordingly, as we are all amenable to his tribunal, fear gives rise to trembling, until God manifests himself as a Father. The holy virgin saw in her own nation such a mass of crimes, that she had good reason for dreading heavier punishments. To remove this fear, the angel declares that he has come to certify and announce an inestimable blessing. The Hebrew idiom, Thou hast found favor, is used by Luke instead of, “God has been merciful to thee:” for a person is said to find favor, not when he has sought it, but when it has been freely offered to him. Instances of this are so well known, that it would be of no use to quote them.

Vs 31. Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb

The angel adapts his words, first to Isaiah’s prophecy, (Isaiah 7:14,) and next to other passages of the Prophets, with the view of affecting more powerfully the mind of the virgin: for such prophecies were well known and highly esteemed among the godly. At the same time, it ought to be observed that the angel did not merely speak in private to the ear of the virgin, but brought glad tidings, (εὐαγγέλιον,) which were shortly afterwards to be published throughout the whole world. It was not without the purpose of God, that the agreement, between ancient prophecies and the present message respecting the manifestation of Christ, was so clearly pointed out. The word conceive is enough to set aside the dream of Marcion and Manichaeus: for it is easy to gather from it that Mary brought forth not an ethereal body or phantom, but the fruit which she had previously conceived in her womb.

Thou shalt call his name Jesus The reason of the name is given by Matthew: for he shall save his people from their sins, (Matthew 1:21.) And so the name contains a promise of salvation, and points out the object for which Christ was sent by the Father into the world, as he tells us that he “came not to judge the world, but to save the world,” (John 12:47.) Let us remember that not by the will of men, but by the command of God, was this name given to him by the angel, that our faith may have its foundation, not in earth, but in heaven. It is derived from the Hebrew word ישע, salvation, from which comes הושיע, which signifies to save. It is a waste of ingenuity to contend that it differs from the Hebrew name יהושוע, (Jehoshua or Joshua.) The Rabbins everywhere write the word Jesu; and they do this with evident malice, that they may not bestow on Christ an honorable name, but, on the contrary, may insinuate that he is some pretended Jew. Their manner of writing it, accordingly, is of no more importance than the barking of a dog. The objection that it is far beneath the dignity of the Son of God to have a name in common with others, might equally apply to the name Christ, or Anointed But the solution of both is easy. What was exhibited in shadow under the law is fully and actually manifested in the Son of God; or, what was then a figure is in him a substance. There is another objection of as little weight. They assert that the name of Jesus is not worthy of veneration and awe, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, (Philippians 2:9, 10,) if it does not belong exclusively to the Son of God. For Paul does not attribute to him a magical name, as if in its very syllables majesty resided, but his language simply means that Christ has received from the Father the highest authority, to which the whole world ought to submit. Let us then bid adieu to such imaginations, and know, that the name Jesus was given to

Christ, in order that believers may be instructed to seek in him what had formerly been shadowed out under the Law.

Vs 32. He shall be great

The angel had said the same thing about John the Baptist, and yet did not intend to make him equal to Christ. But the Baptist is great in his own class, while the greatness of Christ is immediately explained to be such as raises him above all creatures. For to him alone this belongs as his own peculiar prerogative to be called the Son of God. So the apostle argues. Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? (Hebrews 1:5.)

Angels and kings, I admit, are sometimes dignified with this title in Scripture; but they are denominated in common the sons of God, on account of their high rank. But it is perfectly clear and certain, that God distinguishes his own Son from all the others, when he thus addresses him particularly, Thou art my Son, (Psalm 2:7.) Christ is not confounded either with angels or with men, so as to be one of the multitude of the sons of God; but what is given to him no other has a right to claim. The sons of God are kings, not certainly by natural right, but because God has bestowed on them so great an honor. Even angels have no right to this distinction, except on account of their high rank among creatures, in subordination to the Great Head, (Ephesians 1:21.) We too are sons, but by adoption, which we obtain by faith; for we have it not from nature: Christ is the only Son, the only-begotten of the Father, (John 1:14.)