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8 December 2021

Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Reflection by Patricia Gemmell

Introduction

While today's feast celebrates the Catholic Church's belief that Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin, the Scripture readings focus on God, whose divine purpose is to bring salvation to the whole of creation in and through his son, Jesus Christ. It is in accepting God's will that Mary makes this possible and so becomes the mother of God.

Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you are the Son of Mary. Lord have mercy.

You are the glory of God. Christ have mercy.

You show us the Father. Lord have mercy.

First Reading

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

When God learns of how Adam and the woman came to eat of the forbidden fruit, God curses the serpent in a poetic passage that the Church has interpreted as a foretelling of the coming of Christ. In this interpretation the enmity between the woman, Mary, and the serpent will be resolved by the victory of Mary's son, Jesus, over Satan.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 97(98):1-4

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wonderful deeds.

Psalm 97 sings joyfully of God's marvellous deeds, not only for Israel and the nations, but indeed for the whole of creation.

Second Reading

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Today's reading, most likely written by a disciple of Paul, is part of a long and beautiful blessing prayer. What is clearly stated is God's love for us from before the beginning of the world, a love expressed in the divine purpose throughout history and made visible in Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading

Luke 1:26-38

In Luke's account of the Annunciation, a frightened young woman is asked to make both a huge leap of faith and a courageous decision. Luke presents Mary as the first and best model of discipleship in her total acceptance of what God asked of her, knowing how much it would cost her but ultimately trusting in God's compassion and love.

Reflection

In all three readings today, we are made aware that what we are living is God's story. God is the one in command, knowing what God wants but always desiring that we creatures collaborate in a spirit of love and gratitude. God will never force us against our will and desires nothing but our good. How will we respond to God's invitation?

In the beautiful opening hymn of the letter to the Ephesians, there is no room for doubt: "Before the world was made, he chose us...chosen from the beginning, under the predetermined plan of the one who guides all things as he decides by his own will." It is an expression of early Christian faith, and now ours, that we have been loved by God since before the world began, and we are a part of the ongoing divine plan. However, this is no cause for complacency but rather for striving to be "holy and spotless, and to live through love," with all that that entails of humility and self-sacrifice.

We are well acquainted with the first reading from Genesis, but how do we interpret it in the light of an understanding that God has a predetermined plan? After all, God is directly involved in this particular story. He is the one who sets the arbitrary rule that the fruit of certain trees is forbidden. Does he actually set Adam and the woman up for failure? Or can we think of the fall, not so much as a failure, but rather as an inevitable step in human growth and development? Do we not all eventually come to know good and evil? Is this not an intrinsic part of being human?

While we are accustomed to thinking that God sent his son into the world because Adam sinned, we can take heart from an alternative theology, expounded in the works of mediaeval theologian, Duns Scotus, the great Karl Rahner, and, more recently, many of our contemporary eco-theologians. They all say that God intended the incarnation from the very beginning, because God, who is Love, must, by God's very nature, necessarily have longed for union with the beloved, the world of creation. As theologian Elizabeth Johnson puts it, "the incarnation is not dependent on the sin of our first parents. It was Love's very intent from the beginning." Or to put it another way, in the words of the eminent Australian theologian, Denis Edwards, "God's self-giving in the incarnation is the very purpose and meaning of creation."

In today's gospel, in which the angel of the Lord announces the Incarnation, he makes no mention of Adam or Eve. Nevertheless, there is quite definitely a plan in God's mind. Mary is to have a son, Jesus, the Son of the Most High, who will fulfill the ancient hopes of Israel by ascending to the throne of his ancestor David and ruling over Jacob's house forever. In other words, God is going to enter human history, to begin a reign that has no end. "Rejoice," says Gabriel. He brings good news.

He calls Mary, "so highly favoured." We are more familiar with the translation, "full of grace." The original Greek word used by Luke means something like "having been endowed with grace," and appears nowhere else in the New Testament. It is this particular word of salutation that is commonly cited as witness to the Church's belief that Mary was so graced by God that she was conceived without the stain of original sin. She, in particular, was chosen before the world was made, to be holy and spotless. What is important for us to grasp here is that the fullness of grace in Mary is a matter, first and foremost, of God's initiative. This is gift, freely given. She has been chosen to be the mother of God. But God will not force her. God desires her consent.

Deeply disturbed by the angel's greeting, she asks herself what this greeting could mean. Of everything the angel says to calm her anxiety and convey his message, the one thing she grasps is that she is going to have a baby. Now she has real reason to fear, given her unmarried state and the culture in which she lives. When she asks how this can possibly be, since she is a virgin, the angel explains that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. And if Mary still has any doubts, the angel finally tells her, to prove that "nothing is impossible to God," that her barren kinswoman, Elizabeth, is now six months pregnant.

The angel spends a good deal of time telling Mary how great her son Jesus is going to be, but it seems to me that Mary is far more impressed with the fact that Elizabeth is miraculously pregnant. It is this bodily, physical reality that speaks more to her of God's compassionate, loving kindness than the angel's prophecies. Fear in the knowledge of what this pregnancy might cost her gives way in the light of this particular revelation. Immediately she embraces God's will in all humility. "I am the handmaid of the Lord," she says. "Let what

you have said be done to me.” And then the angel left her, because he had received what he had come for: Mary’s consent to God’s will.

If the readings today tell us that God has a predetermined plan, the psalm reminds us that salvation is for the whole of creation, just not human beings.

*All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
Shout to the Lord all the earth,
ring out your joy.*

In the midst of an undoubted global ecological crisis, what is God’s cosmic, grace-filled plan for the salvation of our earth? Mary’s story shows us that each one of us, no matter how seemingly unimportant, has a part to play in it. We have been chosen and grace has been given, to live through love in God’s presence. What will that mean for us today?



The virgin
is with
child
and shall
bear a
son
and she
will call
him
Emmanuel.

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

As we honour Mary in her Immaculate Conception, let us offer our needs to our Father, who is our Creator.

Petitions

We pray for Pope Francis, all Church Leaders and members of the Plenary Council. Guide them to be leaders of integrity and that they respectfully consider the voices of those they serve as we all walk the journey to the Synod.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray that as a Church we will be open to the challenges and opportunities that the Plenary Council will present. May the 'God who is, who was and who is to come', live in our hearts throughout this important time of discernment and decision making.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for us all, that in the midst of our nakedness and fragility, we do not hide but are open to listening to your voice.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all expectant mothers; as our Blessed Mother was responsive to the calling to be a mother, that they too may be receptive to their calling.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for women who are struggling to have babies as did Elizabeth, that their bodies may conceive and give birth to healthy babies.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who are not well, particularly those affected by the pandemic. May they be strengthened in you, especially when the pain is unbearable, and may their carers show them love and compassion.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for ourselves that she, who is full of grace, may pray with us on our pilgrimage.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

Conclusion

Father in heaven, hear the prayers we lay before you as we pray with the Immaculate Virgin Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

GA

Hail Queen of heaven. H. Hemy. 546

Immaculate Mary. Foley/ Lourdes. 549

Magnificat (Tell out my soul). T. Dudley Smith/ W. Greatorex. 550

My soul rejoices. O. Alstott. 250

There is nothing told. C. Willcock SJ. 548

AOV1

O holy Mary. O. Alstott. 141

AOVNG

Among all. Chris de Silva. 8
All the ends of the Earth. Bobby Fisher. 5

CWB

Holy Virgin, by God's decree. Jean-Paul Lécot, tr. W. R. Lawrence. 714
Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you. Brian Foley. 723
O Mary of graces and Mother of God. Tr. Douglas Hyde. 769
Sing of Mary, pure and lowly. Roland Ford Palmer SSJE. 808

CWBII

Gentle Virgin Mother. Paraphr. Anthony G. Petti. 407
Holy Virgin, by God's decree. Jean-Paul Lécot, tr. W. R. Lawrence. 410
Mary, Mother of Good Counsel. Murray J. Kroetsch. 411
O holy Mary. Owen Alstott. 413
Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you. Brian Foley. 416
There is nothing told. Didier Rimaud SJ, tr. Christopher Willcock SJ. 418
Holy light on earth's horizon. Edward Caswall. 442

S&S1

All the ends of the Earth. Bobby Fisher. 75

S&S2

All the ends of the Earth. Ken Canedo. 270
Hail Mary: gentle woman. Carey Landry. 336

Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 97: *Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done wonderful deeds.*
Psalm 97: Anthony Briggs. CWB 472
Psalm 98 (97): Jenny O'Brien. JOBF pg. 59
Sing to the Lord a New Song. Marty Haugen and David Haas. pg.126 LPSF

Music selections by Michael Mangan

Sing new songs of joy (FWS/CWB II) *based on Ps 97 (98)*
All the ends of the earth (LCC) *Ps 97/98 (Chn's Lectionary [Psalm, Gifts]*
Mary Said Yes (TT/SYJ) [CHILDREN: Gathering, Recessional]
My Spirit Sings (FWS/SYJ/CWB II) *Magnificat*
Waiting for the Child (TT/SYJ) [Non-Scriptural Reflection]