

A thought for December

In the Calendar of the Church of England, 8th December is acknowledged as the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Apart from Jesus himself, Mary is the only person whose conception is formally honoured by the church. Why should this be? In the case of Jesus, it is fairly obvious; his conception at the Annunciation was the beginning of the earthly life of the Word-made-flesh, Emmanuel, God with us.

Mary's conception is a sign that Jesus did not "come out of the blue" so to speak, but that God was at work beforehand, preparing her for her vital role in bearing and nurturing the promised Saviour. It is hard to overestimate the importance of good and holy parenting for every child, but never more so than in the case of Jesus. The great Anglican bishop Thomas Ken (1637 - 1711) summed up God's grace at the very beginning of Mary's existence in his verse:

*The Holy Ghost His temple in her built,
Cleansed from congenial, kept from mortal guilt;
And from the moment that her blood was fired,
Into her heart Celestial Love inspired.*

This is what is meant by describing Mary's conception as "immaculate" - without stain. It does not mean that Mary was conceived or born in anything other than the usual way. Above all, it does not mean that she had no need of a redeemer - her Son. Mary, like everyone else needed to be saved from sin, but God preserved her from sin by his "prevenient grace", his grace going beforehand, so that she could be the mother her own son and Saviour needed.

There is a pictorial representation of this in a stained glass window at the back of St Faith's church (west end of the south aisle) commemorating the appearance of Mary to St Bernadette of Lourdes.

May God who called and prepared Mary to be the mother of the Incarnate Word, equip us too for whatever purpose he has for our lives and give us grace to say with her "Be it to me according to your word."

