

A sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry, Christopher Cocksworth, on the Feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2018 during the visit of The Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham to the Cathedral Church of St Michael, Coventry

Readings: Genesis 3.9-15, 20-21; Ephesians 1.3-6, 11-12; Luke 1.26-38

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Bishop Philip, dear Brother Bishops, dear Fathers, dear Mothers and Sisters of the Church, dear faithful in Christ, dear Shrine and People of our Lady of Walsingham, it is wonderful to welcome you to Coventry and to our Cathedral; and it is a very great honour to preach on this occasion, and especially to be trusted to do so on this Feast.

I'd like us to think about Mary exemplifying the sanctified, Spirit-filled life of the kingdom of God, and showing us what it is to be a disciple of her son, the Saviour of the world.

Permit me, to begin with some ground work, perhaps more for my benefit than yours.

Mary favoured and full of grace

Some time ago I wrote about how Mary holds together evangelical, catholic and charismatic instincts over grace and justification. How Mary embodies the two emphases, held together in tight tension, by the Joint Declaration by Roman Catholics and Lutherans on the Doctrine of Justification:

God's unmerited favour, the gift of God's free – incongruous, undeserved, unmerited grace, on the one hand, *which is at the same time*, on the other, grace that transforms and reconstitutes the human being as a new creation living life in the Spirit of God.

Let me relate that to today's Feast.

In order for Mary to be the sort of mother who will receive Christ faithfully and nurture Christ well, she needs to be of a certain character – she needs to be full of grace, transformed by the sanctifying grace of God at work in the believer. In place of the garments of skin with which the Lord mercifully clothed Adam and Eve as they left the garden, the kindness of ordinary grace, if you will, Mary needs to be clothed with gospel grace, power from on high, to receive and nurture the Son of the Most High.

At the same time, in order for Mary to be truly an example of God's incongruous, undeserved, unmerited grace, she needs to be chosen irrespective of this character, simply on the basis of God's gracious favour. Hence, she is chosen at her conception, independently of her moral virtue which is – her moral virtue I mean – not a cause of God's favour to her but a consequence of it.

Mary freed from the love of sinning

Interestingly, it is a little spat in the eighteenth Evangelical revival that helps me to grasp something of what was going on at Mary's conception. When Charles Wesley penned his great hymn, 'Love Divine, All Love's Excelling', it included the line, 'Take away the power of sinning'. Joseph Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, objected. 'We cannot ask the Lord to take away our power of sinning', he said. 'That would be to ask God to take away the freedom of our human nature'. John Wesley knew that Charles was on to something but he saw Joseph's point and so ordered the verse be dropped. Later though, someone came up with a new line and the verse was restored, though not, regrettably, to Anglican hymnbooks. Nevertheless, Evangelicals sing, heartily, 'Take away the love of sinning'.

What I understand the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to be reaching after – and please put me right if I am wrong – is not that Mary was freed from the power of sinning but from the love of sinning. It was not that she was incapacitated to sin but that she was freed from the captivity of sin.

Like Eve she was not created with an incapacity *to sin* but with a capacity *not to sin* – the stain of irresistible propensity to sin had been removed. Unlike Eve, she chooses to live in this capacity and not to fall captive to sin.

Rather than saying, ‘No, it will not be to me according to your word, here I am the servant of myself – the slave of my own desires who insists on choosing the fruit that delights my eyes’.

Mary said, ‘Yes, let it be to me according to your word – here am I, the servant of the Lord who receives the fruit that God, by grace, gives to me, the fruit of my womb, even though I fear the price of such obedience, the cost of such discipleship.’

Here, at this moment, this annunciation, we see Mary, conceived in grace, formed by grace, shaped by the gift of God, choosing to live as God desires: living dependently on God, obediently to God and so openly to God that she *receives* – and *does not reject* – the life of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, I am almost ready to plant an idea in your minds but I need to work the ground just a little more if I may.

Just as Mary’s obedience at the annunciation follows from God’s prior work in her to prepare her for this point of bearing the life of God within her, so it leads into a life that prepares the child whom she bears, to bring life to the world – the life that even now Mary is living *before* Christ’s saving work *because of* Christ’s saving work.

We know so much today about the importance of a mother’s formation of a child: pre-natal, birth, early post-natal and throughout childhood into adulthood. Through Mary – this Feast contends – Jesus learnt the sort of dispositions, disciplines and decisions that daily living in the love of God, rather than self and sin, require.

Mary living in the Spirit

So now we are at the point where I can sow a seed in your hearts and minds that has been growing in mine for some time – a seed of speculation on the mothering of Mary and the forming of God incarnate, not only in the womb but throughout his life.

Let me put it to you by way of some questions.

You know those marks of the disciple, those characteristics of the kingdom, those blessed attitudes that Jesus describes at the beginning of his ministry sitting on the Mount, those marks of Christian living that preoccupy Pope Francis, did Jesus see them in, and learn them from, his mother, blessed among women?

Did Jesus see in his mother one who was so poor in spirit that she lived not in the strength of her-*self* but in the strength of God’s arm; and did he learn that that is how to live in the kingdom of God?

Did Jesus see in his mother one who mourned, grieving, as a young wife, her gentle, guardian husband Joseph, being comforted by the Spirit’s gift of a garland instead of ashes; and did he learn through her what it is to grieve for the child of a widow or one’s own dear friend, and to rage against that old enemy of death?

Did Jesus see in his mother one so meek in herself that she was strong in God, and who, though poor and lowly, knew that the Mighty One had done such great things for her that she inherited the earth; and did he learn through her that even the wind and the waves are subject to the Word through whom all things came into being?

Did Jesus see in his mother one who so hungered and thirsted for righteousness that she was filled with good things, confident that the powerful would be brought down from their thrones, and the rich sent empty away; and did he learn through her to bring good news to the poor?

Did Jesus see in his mother one made so merciful by the mercy of God, the mercy that belongs to those who fear God with a holy fear, a fear before the God who speaks through angels, overshadows with his Spirit, and fulfils his word; and did he learn through her to tell stories about the mercy of God who scans the horizon for the return of his children wandering far from home?

Did Jesus see in his mother a peacemaker who suffered the cruelty of Herodian rule, faced daily the violence of Roman occupation and saw through – like mothers do – the futility of the Zealots' way of revolt; and did he learn from her that violence can only be overcome by weapons of peace, the turn of the cheek, the sword put away and injury healed, suffering and sacrifice, facing violence down and bearing its causes away, even if that will pierce your own mother's soul?

And did Jesus see in his mother – and here the connection with today's Feast is at its clearest – one so pure in heart that she saw God, and did he learn through his mother, and the way she looked at him, that he was God in flesh, the substance of her flesh?

On this day joyful when we celebrate the conception of Mary's life with hearts rejoicing, let us not dwell on the remaining beatitudes: the blessedness of those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and the blessedness of those reviled and who have all kinds of evil uttered falsely against them on Jesus' account, but let us rejoice and be glad, for great is their reward in heaven.

And us?

And let me leave you and me – with a one final question: does Jesus see this blessedness in us; and can he teach the world through us, members now of his Holy Family, with the same mother, how to live in the Spirit of life?

Remember, the angel said to Mary, 'Nothing will be impossible with God'.

And remember Mary said to the angel: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according your word'.

And remember Mary says to us: 'Do whatever he tells you'.

As we do so, water is turned into wine and wine into blood, the cup of everlasting life, the feast of the new covenant, the conception of the kingdom of God.