

Full of Grace

19 12 10

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary,
to be the mother of your Son;
grant that as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him,
when he comes again as our judge.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Matthew chapter 1 and verse 20: 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'

The Christmas story has at its heart a man, his wife and a baby boy. Located in time in the depth of our Northern Hemisphere winter, it is a story which warms our hearts each year when again we hear the familiar details of angels and shepherds; a star and wisemen; a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in a stable of an Inn in Bethlehem.

On one level, the story of the Nativity works well for children for it has all the magic of Narnia or Harry Potter but none of their epic length though its underlying significance has in fact epic proportions. But the story of the Nativity poses adult questions, too, which are raised by this morning's gospel.

Joseph is engaged to Mary. In this period at this time in this society, it would be perfectly acceptable for them to sleep together and for a child to be conceived by their union for the contract of betrothal meant that they were committed ultimately to be married and the birth of children was a prime purpose of marriage. Joseph was a man and he knew, as we all know, how babies are conceived. His problem was simply that he knew that the child was not his because he had not yet slept with Mary: she was, as far as he was concerned, still a virgin. And yet he now knew that his supposedly virgin bride was pregnant! So his conclusion was inexorable: if not him then who? Mary had betrayed him but Joseph was an honourable man who, I believe, loved his future wife and though hurt and disappointed, he did not want to make a public fuss and shame her openly so he resolved to break their engagement quietly to spare the girl he loved. And then he went to sleep and in a dream, an angel appeared to him who said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.' And he did and the rest is history.

But it raises an interesting question about how Christians view the status of Mary. Were Mary to have had sex with anyone but her husband-to-be, she would 'technically' be committing a form of 'adultery', given their engagement was binding. But if not adultery, then clearly it was fornication. As I said, most adults and probably nowadays most children know the facts of life and are not surprised

by where babies come from. The surprise here is that actually, far from being sinful, Mary is regarded as sinless, at least by the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception which is the name Catholics give to the 8th December which marks the birth of the Blessed Virgin. So how can Mary be considered to have been born without sin if everyone after the Fall is deemed to be sinful from birth – the doctrine of original sin? Adam and Eve were in a state of grace in the Garden of Eden. Until they ate the apple, they were without sin. It is curious that the 'Ave Maria', the most well known Marian prayer, starts with these words, 'Hail Mary, full of grace'. The phrase suggests that she, Mary, enjoys a unique status among mankind. Of all women since the time of Eve, Mary alone is full of grace. Mary is the new Eve. Just as through Eve's disobedience, the door was opened to Man's expulsion from Eden so too through Mary's perfect obedience, the door was opened to Man's salvation. Now belief in the Immaculate Conception is not an Anglican doctrine: on 8th of December, we celebrate the Conception of Mary. But I personally found the Auxiliary Bishop of Rennes, Nicolas Souchou's, explanation of how Catholics understand Mary's status of 'being without sin' as illuminating – think of it more as being in a 'state of grace', of prelapsarian grace, as being the first person to be just like Adam and Eve before the Fall.

As we prepare for Christmas in the coming week, we have the example of Joseph and of Mary before us. Both said yes to God. Both co-operated fully with God's

purpose for Mankind. But would we be prepared to say yes to God's plan and purpose for us? Would we, could we say yes to him?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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H: Sermon 23: Full of grace

