

8 December – Immaculate Conception A – B – C

First reading Genesis 3:9-15.20

After Adam had eaten of the tree, the Lord God called to him. "Where are you?" he asked. "I heard the sound of you in the garden," he replied. "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "Who told you that you were naked?" he asked. "Have you been eating of the tree I forbade you to eat?"

The man replied, "It was the woman you put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

Then the Lord God asked the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman replied, "The serpent tempted me and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, be accursed beyond all cattle, all wild beasts. You shall crawl on your belly and eat dust every day of your life. I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring.

It will crush your head and you will strike its heel." The man named his wife "Eve" because she was the mother of all those who live.

Second reading Ephesians 1:3-6.11-12

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted children, through Jesus Christ for his own kind purposes, to make us praise the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved. And it is in him that we were claimed as God's own, chosen from the beginning, under the predetermined plan of the one who guides all things as he decides by his own will; chosen to be, for his greater glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ before he came.

Gospel Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, "Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you." She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end."

Mary said to the angel, "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" the angel answered "and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.

And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God." "I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary "let what you have said be done to me." And the angel left her.

Meditation

The old Byzantine title of this feast conveys a clearer sense of its meaning than our present title: the conception by Saint Anne of the mother of God. We celebrate Mary's conception, not the virgin birth nor Jesus' conception. The earliest evidence for the celebration is found in the eighth-century Eastern Church. From the East the celebration seems to have passed to England in the eleventh century by way of Naples where its title was The Conception of Saint Mary. The history of the feast is inseparable from the development of medieval tracts on original sin. The medieval Church's growing vision of Mary's role in salvation history gave rise to the gradual spread of the feast. The texts for the celebration of this feast throughout the Western Church were first approved and promulgated in 1483.

Pius IX's dogmatic proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception (1854) gave us the present title of this feast. We celebrate the first moment of Mary's existence as a wonderful spring-time of grace.

This does not in any way suggest that God is playing whimsically with the law of human solidarity in sin. Mary is no "spoiled child" of her Father. By affirming, after long reflection, that the Virgin never lost her original innocence and that she is the new Eve, the Church affirms nothing more than the salvation of the one who was to become the mother of the Saviour. She was redeemed by God, in a unique and pre-eminent way, through the saving work of her Son.

Predisposed by God for the unparalleled role which was to be hers in the history of salvation, Mary thus enjoyed the fruits of redemption more fully than any other creature. Filled with grace from her conception, she came to that faultless unity which put her in full accord with her Son and which would make of her in the true sense of the term and in total dependence on Christ, the mother of divine grace.

Her whole life was one of fidelity to a vocation wonderfully announced, "Hail, full of grace!" This is good news for the entire world, the optimistic assurance that, in the universe of salvation, God is faithful to his promise.