



Second Sunday of Advent

Homily

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Sunday 9 December 2018
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

Yesterday, December 8, the whole Church throughout the world celebrated the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For the Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Perth, this feast day holds special meaning. The Cathedral in which we have gathered this morning for Mass is dedicated to Mary, the Mother of the Lord, under this special title of the Immaculate Conception, and our whole archdiocese has been placed under the protection of Mary's prayers, again using this title. Yesterday was, then, the feast day of this beautiful cathedral and of all of us who make up the Catholic community in this archdiocese. So, happy feast day for yesterday to you all.

The Church's belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary means, quite simply, that Mary, from the very beginnings of her life in the womb of her mother, was free from original sin. That sin finds its origins in the dreadful failure of the first human beings to live in fidelity to the God who had given them life. While science continues to probe the mysteries of human life, and indeed of all creation, from a scientific point of view, our faith assures us that sin was not part of God's original intention for his people. Rather sin entered the world when the first human beings chose to turn their backs on the God of life and in a sense establish themselves as the ultimate source of wisdom, authority and morality in the world. This first sin introduced the power of evil into God's creation. It is a power which all of us experience in our own lives, a power which has been at work in us from the very beginnings of our life in the womb of our mothers.

In teaching that through a special gift of God Mary was protected from this power of evil at the beginning of her life the Church invites us to ask ourselves why. Many suggested answers have been offered over the centuries and have entered into our understanding of God's work in offering us salvation from the power of sin and death which play out in our lives each day. More recently, in a very authoritative way, the Church has clarified for us that this extraordinary gift of grace given to Mary is an essential dimension of the gift of salvation which comes to us in and through Jesus. In the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" we find this explanation: *"In order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace"* (CCC490).



The salvation God offers us is always a free gift which we have done nothing to deserve but which we so desperately need. Gifts which are freely given are meant to be freely received. God will never force us to accept his wonderful gifts – but there had to be someone who, on our behalf, could give an initial and completely free “yes” to this gift so that the saviour, Jesus, could enter into our story and become God’s invitation to life for all of us. Because Mary was so free in herself that there was nothing, no trace of sin, which could stop her from responding to God’s invitation with complete and unwavering generosity, salvation has become possible for all of us.

Of course it still remains for each one of us to give our own personal “yes” to God’s offer of salvation. In a very real sense that “yes” was first given at our baptism, but the grace of baptism itself must be renewed and received each day. God will not force us into heaven and the joy of eternal life: we remain free to say “yes” or “no” to his call. But that we have the chance to say our own “yes” is due to the faith, generosity and love which enabled Mary to say her “yes”.

This of course is what Saint Paul prays for in today’s second reading: *“May your love for each other increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so that you can always recognise what is best”*. As love grows within us, so will our freedom to be all that God is calling us to be also grow. We will become, as Saint Paul puts it, pure and blameless, able to welcome the coming of Christ into our lives today with the joy about which we sing so often in our Christmas carols: *“joy to the world – the Lord has come”*.

It is no mere coincidence that the celebration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary always occurs in Advent. As Pope Paul VI, now Saint Paul VI, reminded the Church 50 years ago, Mary is the great saint of Advent. As we journey in our hearts with her as she prepares for the birth of the saviour, as we sit quietly with her in prayer, she will help us understand what it means to wait in hope for the coming of the Lord, what it means to say “yes” to all that God is asking of us, and what it means to live our lives with the eyes of our minds and hearts fixed firmly on Jesus. In doing this, in sitting with Mary in prayer in these Advent days, we will be responding to the call of Saint John the Baptist in today’s Gospel, *“Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight”*.