

**GATHERING FOR RELIGIOUS  
FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
8<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2015  
LLANTARNAM ABBEY**

One of the many beautiful features of this convent chapel is surely the stained glass window, which looks down on us all. If you stand outside, the symbolic design can't be easily seen. But when the lights of the chapel are on shining out, or the sun shines in, the meaning of the symbols come to life. This image speaks to me as I try to reflect on the significance of the feasts, which the Church celebrates, the faith, which they express, and the devotion, which they engender. *Lex orandi, Lex credendi.*

If I can mix my images, this Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is like part of a larger mosaic. It cannot be understood unless it is seen as part of a whole. I like to think of Mary as the sign, the symbol or the model of everything humanity could have been. Everything we are. And everything we one day hope to be.

We believe that human beings are created by God, loved by God and destined for union with God in this life and the next. The Book of Genesis describes this harmonic relationship in terms of Paradise, the Garden of Eden, where man and beast are at ease with each other, at ease with creation, at ease with their creator.

Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan “... *you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (Gen 3:6). You will have power, knowing all things - but not necessarily being able to control them as we have learned to our cost. It is no accident that we call Mary the ‘New Eve’. Our belief that from all eternity the pre-vision of God saw that in this woman there would be one totally conformed to His will. Allowing God to be God in her life. Not touched by Original Sin because she would not confirm that sin in her life. Therefore immaculately conceived, preserved from the stain of sin, from the alienation from God which comes from seeking to become as God yourself. You will know that one of the major controversies of the Protestant Reformation was that the sinlessness of Mary somehow removes her from the need for salvation of the whole human race. The theological language through which we understand the Immaculate Conception is “Realised Eschatology” – the end has already been achieved.

In her journey of faith, Mary is also the sign and symbol of everything we are on our own journey of faith and life and love. Surely she can speak to the searcher, the challenged, the confused. “*How can this be since I am a virgin?*” (Lk 1:34). She speaks to the parents of a troubled teenager. “*My son, why did you do this to us? Did you not know that your father and I would be looking for you?*” (Lk 2:48). And to those who suffer as innocent victims, or those who have to bear the death of someone they love. Our Lady of Sorrows speaks through her experience of standing at the foot of the cross. She must have wondered, in every sense of the word, if this was the cost of faith. “*Be it done unto me according to your word*” (Lk 1:38) was the

beginning of her journey of faith, not it's end. She is the sign and symbol of hope on our pilgrim way.

Surely she is also a sign and symbol of all we are called to be - in union with God, knowing ourselves as we are known and loved and forgiven. No wonder we call that state 'heaven' – and for eternity. The feast of her Assumption into heaven and our devotion to her as 'Queen of Heaven' are each expressions of another profound truth: that we also have a foretaste of that eternal life each time we share in Holy Communion here on earth.

In the year 2010 I had to speak to the Church of England synod as they struggled with the ARCIC document 'Mary, Hope and Grace in Christ'. The Anglican bishop who originally presented it once said:

*"I accept this document with my head but my heart won't let me".*

The devotion we have to the place of Mary in the history of salvation relies on that – a union of heart and mind in an understanding of her unique place in salvation history. It is impossible to be faithful to the scriptures without taking the place of Mary seriously. In the scriptures, we interpret the Old Testament typologically with reference to Christ. We use typology in our reading of the Hebrew Bible when speaking of Mary. The covenant relationship, the call of individuals to have 'great things' done for them and to do 'great things' in turn, as well as being known and called by God is revealed beautifully in Psalm 139.

*O God you search me and you know me,  
You know my resting and my rising,  
You discern my purpose from afar.  
You formed my inmost being,  
Knit me together in my mother's womb*

And in the prophet Jeremiah:

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
And before you were born I consecrated you (Jeremiah 1:4-5)*

These words are all part of the trajectory or movement of a perfect response to God who initiated the movement towards humanity and every individual in the great act of creation.

The sense of wonder in the life of Mary at the prevenient grace of God and as a 'type' of all we are created to be is portrayed beautifully by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans:

*"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that they might be the firstborn among many. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified". (Romans 8:28-30)*

She is indeed the highest honour of our race. (Judith 13:18-19)

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