

The Immaculate Conception of Mary  
(Genesis 3:9-15.20 / Luke 1:26-38)  
08.12.2018

Even if we don't remember the content of the most famous speech delivered by late Dr Martin Luther King, I suspect we all remember this key phrase: *I have a dream*.

I'm sure we all have our dreams too, though few of us actually realise them to the extent we should.

This morning I would like to reflect with you on God's dream for us.

It is a dream that by the refusal of our first parents seemed to have been shattered, but, by Mary's complete acceptance and total welcoming of God's word, God's dream for humanity was restored.

God's dream for each one of us, is a dream of love... love lived in harmony; it is a dream of perfect communion.

We are called to realise that dream each and every day of our lives, striving to become what God would have us be; striving to develop our full potential and achieve our greatest well-being.

Bearing in mind what I have just said, let us turn to God's word for the light it sheds upon God's dream – and our own.

Our first reading leads us back to the creation story and the dreamlike situation in which our first parents lived.

You will remember from the Genesis account how *God created all that is by His word*. You will also recall how *the Spirit first hovered over the void* and from below its shadow all that is was brought into being. When we think back to the *Story of the Origins* we remember how before *the Fall* of our first parents theirs was an ideal situation. They lived harmoniously, held together in a bond of trust and love, they dwelt in a setting of perfect peace; they enjoyed life in a lush, beautiful garden – an idyllic setting that God had created for their pleasure and well-being. They enjoyed a perfect relationship with one another which was rooted in their perfect relationship with God: a relationship of obedience, a relationship founded upon mutual respect and accorded listening – heart listening to heart. In these attitudes we have the basis of all good relationships. But then came *the Fall*. Our first parents foolishly gave into the tempter's insinuations. The seeds of doubt sown by the Evil One took root in our first parents' hearts; they stopped listening to the truth, they gave way to the lies to which they had lent their ears. This hitherto perfect couple submitted to temptation, they overstepped their God-given boundaries, as a consequence all broke down: mutual accusation, dissension and discord ensued. Everything collapsed; chaos reigned anew. God's dream was shattered!

It seemed that all was lost and humanity was now condemned to live in disarray forever... Until ... until the Advent of Jesus Christ!

With the Advent of Jesus Christ, in the incarnation of the Father's Only Begotten Son, God's dream actually won through again; more than that, we could say that it managed to reach its fulfilment.

The story of the Advent of the Christ is a *new creation* story.

As we listen to Luke's account of the Annunciation, bearing the story of creation from the Book of Genesis in mind, we recognise the key role God's word played in the gift of new life given and the key role of the Spirit as well. I think it fair to read our gospel story as an account of the new beginning – the fresh genesis – inaugurated by Jesus Christ. (We are

perhaps more used to reading the Prologue of John's gospel in this light, but I feel Luke's Annunciation story also has parallels with the creation story.) Once again all is brought about by God's word. Life is brought forth from virgin soil (Mary's virginal womb) by the power of God's word. It is underlined for us in Luke's account – a theme taken up by the Fathers of the Church – how Mary conceived simply by the power of God's word. God's speaks *the Word* who *is* Jesus Christ. St Bernard tells us Mary conceived by her listening.

In the Annunciation story emphasis is also placed upon the hovering of God's Spirit once again. The Spirit's overshadowing of Mary brought forth *the Life* she was given to carry within her and offer to our world: Jesus Christ.

Mary's whole attitude in the Annunciation scene stands in stark contrast to that of Eve in the story of *the Fall*. Mary listens and she believes; she doesn't give in to those voices within herself which, if she had heeded them, would have contradicted God's word and revolted her against His command. Mary submitted to the word spoken to her.

Writing to the Romans, Paul will remind them how if *by one man's disobedience* (Adam) *death was brought into the world, so by one man's obedience* (Christ the New Adam) *life was restored*. There is a very clear contrast between the first and the second Adam running right throughout the New Testament. Whereas the first Adam listened to Eve who contradicted God's instructions to him, the New Adam, Christ, is shown more than once in the gospels doing as He heard the Father bid Him do, rather than give in to the New Eve's desire (Mary's desire) for Him at those moments when she might have held Him back from doing the Father's will.

From early on in His life Jesus knew (and told His mother) that He had to be *about the Father's business*, so, when, during his itinerant ministry, Mary and his other family members came to bring Him home, fearing for His well-being, Jesus made it clear to them, and to all standing by, that nothing and no one would or could restrain Him from taking the path that the Father had bidden Him to walk.

It seems to me that the clear call coming through to us today, through the Scriptures we listen to, is a call to realise God's dream for us. The way for us to do this is indicated. It is through obedience to God's word, it is through attention and docility to the stirrings of God's Holy Spirit around us and within us, that we realise God's dream for us.

The challenge addressed to us on this feast is a challenge to remain attuned, accorded to God's grace. It is a challenge to listen to the Lord and that ultimately that means to obey: *to do whatever He tells us*, as Mary puts it in John's gospel. It is a challenge to live Spirit-led lives and ultimately that means that we simply dare to hold ourselves always under the shadow of God's wings, allowing Him to lead and guide us, allowing Him to take us to the place where He wants us to be, to do what He wants us to do. Sometimes that will be, as Jesus warned Peter, where we would rather not go.

So often we spoil God's dream for ourselves by rising up rebelliously, wanting to take things into our own hands and do things our way. The Frank Sinatra syndrome is never far from us in our pride. We dream of holding centre-stage and even going off-stage singing *I did it my way*, rather than consenting to do everything in our lives God's way.

The nightmares of our lives when we think of them – and I am sure that we have all had nightmare moments in our lives... the nightmare moments in our lives are inclined to begin when we start listening to those voices of doubt, insinuation and suspicion that are wont to arise in our hearts. Our difficulties in life frequently stem from the fact that we have listened

to the voice of our own inner darkness rather than the voice of the One who is our light and our true life: Jesus Christ.

Let us return to those words of Martin Luther King with which we kick-started this reflection. If to this day the words this pastor pronounced have remained so important it is because at the heart of his words is found the eternal Word of God.

After having spoken of his dream for the State of Alabama the prophetic civil rights activist went on to speak of his dream as nothing other than a sharing in God's own dream for humanity. I quote: *I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.* Those words which Martin Luther King made his own are nothing other than God's Advent dream shared with us by the prophet Isaiah. Are we not called to make them our own during this season? During these sacred days, we are invited to align our dreams to God's dream.

Dr Martin Luther King went on to say something else we should be able to go to echo as equally true for ourselves – words which I find especially appropriate for this privileged Advent day in which we celebrate Mary in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception: a mystery which reminds us of our own Holy Hope to live lives free from sin and all that binds us. Let me quote from the famous pastor's landmark speech once again: *This is our hope. (...) With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together.* It is a vision of harmony restored that shines through Dr Martin Luther King's words. The inspired preacher ended his famous discourse dreaming of that place to which we are called – the place forfeited by our first parents in the Fall, but won for us again in Christ-Jesus – when he concluded his address singing of freedom! I quote: *When we let freedom ring ... we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'*

God's dream will be fulfilled when you and I, when all His children, are free from sin... free from sin like Mary, whom we celebrate today in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception, as *the one preserved from all stain of sin*: Mary whom we ask to pray with and for us *poor sinners who have recourse to her.*

Amen!