

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Genesis 3:9-15.20 / Luke 1:26-38)
08.12.2015

The Great Year of Mercy offered to us by the Church opens on this day when we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary – a feast that speaks to us of the saving power of God's grace, His freely-given merciful love, which frees our fallen humanity from sin's hold upon us.

When we really consider the significance of Mary's Immaculate Conception we come to see that this mystery speaks to us loud and clear about salvation as pure gift.

Mary did absolutely nothing to merit being saved.

The definition of the Immaculate Conception states: *By the singular **grace of Almighty God**, in view of **the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour** of the human race, Mary was preserved free from all stain of sin.*

Note that as I spoke I emphasised ***the grace of Almighty God*** and ***the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour***.

Like every believer, Mary was redeemed by God's grace, made manifest in and through the saving work of Christ.

It was by nothing other than by the generous bounty of our God that Mary was preserved from the wound of original sin.

The extraordinary privilege accorded to Mary is a sign of hope for all of us, is it not?

I believe that the mystery we celebrate today speaks to us of God's desire to see each one of us come to know that freedom of heart Mary knew, so as to be able to respond to the Lord's call in our lives and commit ourselves to do His will as she did.

The whole sense of this *Great Year of Mercy* is to have us open our hearts to the gift God wants to see us enjoy: freedom of heart.

The Lord wants to see all of us set free from the weight of guilt, the burden of our sins, the bonds of shame which weigh us down and hold us in shackles.

I dare to use yet again this morning a little phrase rooted in the teaching of St Augustine which has spoken much to me these past few years and which still speaks to me today. I am thinking of that little phrase ***free person under grace***.

This is how the Lord wants to see all of us live: as *free persons under grace!*

Because of her Immaculate Conception, the Blessed Virgin Mary was a *free person under grace*. Freedom is a hallmark of her whole life and of her response to God.

We long for freedom.

We have not attained this grace as yet, but the call addressed to us is a call to believe that we will.

We are called to live our lives in freedom of heart, responding to God's will for us – as Mary puts it at Cana, freely choosing *to do whatever He tells us*.

In the *Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis explains the reason why today's date was chosen for the opening of this season of grace.

The Holy Year will open on 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This liturgical feast day recalls God's action from the very beginning of the history of mankind. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So He turned His gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. Eph. 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of man's Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy

will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.

Pope Francis goes on to speak of his desire to see any who enter into this *Year of Mercy* being led to *experience the love of God who consoles, pardons and instils hope.*

Some years ago, Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, echoing a reflection of Blessed Paul VI, gave consideration to the significance there is in our celebrating the Immaculate Conception of Mary during the Advent season. This is what he said: *Falling as it does during Advent, today's feast shines like a star to enlighten our path. In the words of Lumen Gentium (an important Vatican II document on the Church): Mary's splendid life - her God-enlightened life – shines out as a sign of certain hope and comfort.*

In our community we like to refer to Mary as *the Mother of Holy Hope* and the great hope we hold in our hearts as we think of her under that title is hope in the grace of conversion.

It befalls each one of us to be as firm in hope, as Mary was, that this grace will be accorded to us. As St Benedict teaches in his Rule for Monks that we should *never to lose hope in God's mercy.* Challenging though this is for us, it is also, at the same time, such an extraordinary consolation to be able to hope in God's merciful love.

Day after day, as we gather in this church to sing God's praises, we take up *Mary's Song of Praise*, the *Magnificat*, at Vespers. We echo those words she first intoned in Zechariah's house when she encountered her cousin Elizabeth. We sing: *God's mercy is from age to age.*

God's mercy is as real for us today as it was for her then.

As Zechariah himself had sung in his hymn, the *Benedictus* (the song he intoned on the occasion of the birth of his son, John the Baptist): it is each and every day that *the tender mercy of the heart of our God visits us like the dawn from on high.*

Just as the dawn scatters the darkness of night, so God's mercy leads us into the experience of a new day. A fresh start in life is offered to us with the coming of Christ and the display of God's mercy He reveals. This is a constantly renewed grace in our lives, for *God never tires of showing mercy*, as Pope Francis likes to remind us over and over again.

It is bearing these thoughts in mind that I propose that we reflect for just a moment on the first reading we heard proclaimed this morning: that well-known story of the Fall, as it is recounted for us in the Book of Genesis.

This story concerns all of us.

Adam and Eve represent you and me.

We are, all of us, just like Adam, just like Eve, wounded, scarred, fallen, broken, men and women who stand in need of God's mercy.

All so often we react just as our first parents did. We shy away from the God of mercy and compassion who calls out to us. When we feel nothing but guilt and shame we go into hiding. Just like Adam and Eve we make such efforts to mask our nakedness and vulnerability. Just like Adam and Eve we try to justify ourselves by blaming everybody else for our plight – even the God who loved us into being.

Look at what happened in the story.

This couple who had lived in perfect harmony with each other and with their Creator God, in the lush, beautiful surroundings that God had created for their pleasure, allowed that harmony to be broken by their foolish greed and pride. They wanted even more than all they had been given. They resented the boundaries set in place to protect their lives. They violated these boundaries and thus harmed themselves and each other and the whole created order around them.

It is always the same old story that is played out when we follow our proud and foolish ways.

Harmony is broken. Shame and guilt take a grip upon us and destroy our well-being. Barriers (some visible, some invisible) are erected between us and we go into hiding, trying to dodge God's gaze upon us. We imagine God's gaze to be a severe look of harsh judgement when really, no matter how

foolish we have been and even what wrong we have consciously committed, all the Lord wants to do is to look upon us with love and restore our lost lives by His regard of mercy and compassion, which wills only to recreate what we have destroyed.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately knew that they had gone against God's plan for them. They felt this by their own inner malaise.

When and where it becomes clear in the story that Satan has taken hold upon them and caught them in his grip is when they are shown to have become afraid of God.

Just like Adam and Eve, all so easily we too can doubt God's goodness. We can fear the One who loves us and, because of that fear we harbour in our hearts, we can deprive ourselves from the joy of His mercy.

So readily we deprive shy away from the experience of God's love – and the real love of others around us – and in so doing we hinder ourselves from experiencing the well-being and freedom we are called to enjoy.

Signs that we are held in Satan's grasp upon us will be those accusations we level against others, seeking to blame, anyone, everyone, for our ills, rather than accept our own part of responsibility. Fair enough, others will have hurt and wounded us. They will have contributed to the malaise we feel, but we all have our part of responsibility in most of the situations of conflict we know in our relationships with others.

Until we admit to our part of responsibility in what has gone wrong in our lives we will never be able to move forward.

Just like Adam and Eve, many of us spend a good part of our time in denial. Just like them, many of us will have gone into hiding. We may well be hiding, not only from others, but from our true self.

Even as we sit here today we may be ashamed of who we are inside. I venture to say most of us are somewhat ashamed of our selves – even when there is nothing to be ashamed of.

Some of us may resort to foolish ploys to drown these feelings out. So easily we resort to drugs to make us feel better. The drugs of our choice vary. While few of us resort to substances as such, we can and do resort to such things as hyper-activity, feelings of self-righteousness, we nurture feelings of superiority over others – all in a bid to make ourselves feel not just as bad as we nonetheless feel. I remember one old man, who was greatly lucid and truly honest, saying to me that he could see that when he was wasn't feeling good about himself he sought false comfort in observing and reflecting upon others around him in a bid to pinpoint how much worse than he was, they were.

A lot of us do the same thing, but we are not just as lucid and honest as the wise old man who shared his secret with me.

Anyone who self-righteously sets him or her self above others is usually masking a terrible misery about and within themselves.

The real and only remedy for our misery is God's mercy.

Our misery calls forth God's mercy. If only we could see and appreciate that!

In Christ-Jesus, God's mercy comes to visit us. The meeting of misery with mercy is a key to understanding what we are celebrating in this Advent season.

Touched by our misery, our God stooped down to us. He did not demand that we come up to His standard, climb up to His height. He reached down from heaven to grasp us by the hand, caught as we are in the miry clay.

To come down from heaven to save fallen humanity is what God is shown to have done already in the story of Adam and Eve. God came to walk in that corner of the garden where our first parents had gone into hiding in their shame. He came to that place of false refuge to bring them forth into true freedom. He called them forth from their place of darkness to give them a fresh start in the fullness of His light.

Touched by our misery, God came to us in His Son Jesus. He became the poorest of the poor. He accepted to be vulnerable and exposed; to be needy and dependent upon others in the infant of

Bethlehem. With people, among whom He went about doing good, He was attentive to human distress and people's pain. He suffered the agony of many in His flesh, His emotions and His spirit. He endured our shame for us when He was exposed in the sight of all, hanging on the cross, mocked and derided by all who passed that way.

During the Great Year of Mercy which begins today, we are encouraged by Pope Francis to reflect upon what he calls *the concrete reality of God's mercy*.

Entering into this Year of Mercy, I believe we are invited to ponder on the ways in which we can recognise and practice merciful behaviour in the real situations of our own lives – especially in the fraught relationships that are part of all our lives.

During this Year of Mercy, we are called to be *misericordiae vultus* (the two opening words of the Bull of Indiction), *the face of mercy* for others.

We are called to be merciful and, as such, bridge builders there were connections have broken down.

Pope Francis writes: *Mercy is the bridge that connects God and man*. It is also the bridge that connects people to each other.

Opening our hearts to a hope of being forgiven despite our sinfulness, this mercy which we long for, for ourselves, we are called not only to receive, but also to reflect. This Year of Mercy calls upon us to be attentive not only to our own need for love, in spite of our flaws and our mistakes, our sins and our short-comings, but to be attentive to others' needs for the same graciousness. We are called to allow mercy, God's tenderness, to live within us and flow through us.

Where does mercy come from?

It comes from God, surely, but it also comes from a place deep within ourselves. A mysterious source of mercy within us is an awareness of our own misery.

The Latin word *miser cordia*, as its etymology suggests, carries within it the twofold connotations of wretchedness (*miseria*) and love (symbolised by the heart – *cor*).

If God's mercy is His love responding to misery, mercy in us is born of a sense of our misery calling forth love, from even deeper within us.

God's mercy is His grace at work in our lives. Through the mercy we have for others we reflect precisely something of God's own graciousness in our regard.

Given the Advent context in which we find ourselves and the feast of the Immaculate Conception which always falls during this Advent season, there are lines from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* which come to mind.

I am thinking of those words that Portia speaks which are a kind of echo of the Advent plea *Heavens drop dew from above and let the earth open up and bring forth justice*. (*Justice* there could just as well be rendered *mercy*.)

Portia declares: *The quality of mercy is not strain'd. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest. It blesseth him that gives and him that takes*.

Mercy softens as it irrigates that *place beneath*. (I think of that *place beneath* as perhaps the place of hurt or pain or resentment which is there deep down within us.) The rain of mercy nourishes and frees within us a fruit of justice and brings it forth from the deepest recesses of our hearts.

Portia says *the quality of mercy is not strain'd*. I hear this as a reminder to us that the tendency within us to be strict and judgemental harsh and severe in our assessments of others has to be filtered out and cast aside.

Later on Shakespeare has Portia say: *we do pray for mercy and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy*.

Let us make Portia's prayer our own. Let us ask for mercy and let us show forth mercy by our whole

way of being.

May our prayer for mercy make us merciful. Yes, well and truly mercy-full!