

Behold I make all things new¹

A Sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8th December 2010 by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library

THOSE words, which Our Lord said to S. John, the saint of the Book of the Apocalypse, are the proof and the pledge that he has given us of that inexhaustible renewal which belongs only to his grace, of that inexhaustible love that he pours out on his people, of that infinite goodness that he bestows on us who are unworthy. Those gifts and graces were poured out onto Our Lady and, on this the celebration of her Immaculate Conception, we ask her prayers and intercessions that she may win for us that continual renewal in strength and holiness which will make us fit for heaven and fulfil our eternal destiny. We ask that those new, fresh graces might not be spoiled and marred by the memory of our past failure and shame: that they may not be limited by condition of our fallen humanity in a fallen world: that they may aid us in carrying the burdens of our sin beyond the shifting scene of this present world into the changeless repose of eternity, to rest secure on his eternal changelessness.

Our Lady's "fiat" at the Annunciation made that possible and this feast of her Immaculate Conception marks the beginning of that freely given assent, that embrace of her destiny. This feast points to the promise of Christmas, to the promise of God made man, heaven come down to earth, the salvation of the world lying in a manger, the innocent child hanging on a cross. In a world that is frost-bound, dark and drear, seemingly dead, the first green shoot heralds the approach of spring and its life and light, so in a world mired in sin and desperation that spotless conception heralds the restoration of man's innocence. When Our Blessed Lady was conceived immaculate in the womb of her mother, our salvation is nascent in the bud. Not sunrise, but the dawn; the first flush of dawn that is reflected on the sky from the sunrise that is to come; Our Lady, by the anticipated merits of her Son's Passion, was emancipated from the common lot of her race. As the shoot promises a flower, so this Immaculate Conception promises a virgin birth. God did not choose a spotless virgin to be the Mother of his Son, he created one. The divine life had come into the world of time and space. It owed nothing to man's choosing or his intervention: it was the divine initiative. No angels sang over the hills in celebration, no shepherds left their flocks to come and see, no Wise Men followed a star to witness it, but the first advent had arrived.

Our Lady was the consummation of the Old Testament, the old dispensation, and she was the advent of the new dawn: with her the cycle of history begins anew. When God created the first Adam, he had made his preparations and he had created a Paradise in which Adam could dwell. And when God restored our nature in the second Adam, once again he had made his preparations and had fashioned a second Paradise in which his Son could dwell. That Paradise was the body and soul of Our Blessed Lady, immune from the taint of sin, the curse that was Adam's. Eve's rebellion, the first step towards the degradation of human nature: Mary's obedience, the first step towards its recovery. "Adam, through [Eve's] rebellion, dragged down from Paradise; Christ, through Mary's obedience, brought down from heaven to earth. God, in his justice, disobeyed, outraged,

¹ Apocalypse 21: 5

defiled; God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.”² It may have been winter without but in the home where Anne gave birth to her daughter, spring had begun.

Our winter is God’s spring. That is why we give thanks in this Advent season as we look to the joy of celebrating the Nativity of the Saviour of the world. We look for no further redemption, no new revelation no matter how long it is until Our Lord comes again in glory and judgement. Yet even at a time of renewed hope, we can feel the pressures of the time we can feel a sense, not of despair, but of disillusion. Old certainties are under threat, familiar landmarks are obscured or obliterated, a sense of isolation and alienation easily overcomes us as we face a future of disruption and decay. The Church Catholic has faced such winters before in the great sweep of history: the barbarian invasions, the protestant Reformation, the French Revolution and it now faces the forces of atheism, indifference, relativism and humanism but from what has seemed a wasted landscape the green shoots of hope have come and there has been renewed life and vigour.

It is unsurprising that we may feel discouraged and disorientated. The wonder of the Advent message may not carry that note of hope that we once heard. It is a chill winter and charity has grown cold. But if we allow ourselves these feelings of disillusion with the Church and the world, we fail in our duties and responsibilities as followers of Christ. We allow ourselves to be hemmed in and constrained by the temper of the times. Ours is a wider horizon. Certainties may no longer seem that certain our comfortable surroundings may be melting away, and risk beckons. *Sic transit gloria mundi* : so passes the glory of the world. But, *fides Catholica manet* : the Catholic Faith remains. “It was in the darkness of the night that revelation broke over the hills of Bethlehem. It was in the deepest stillness that the first notes of the angels’ song were heard. It was while man proclaimed that the world was sinful beyond redemption that the Immaculate life was lived unseen.”³ Our Lady did not allow herself to be constrained and tied by the tenor of the times and the temper of the age. She abandoned herself and her security to the will of God.

“Behold I make all things new.” If we seek and would ask for that renewal of our lives and our Church, ask it through the intercession of Our Lady to whom God first whispered the secret of his coming among us: ask it through her intercession in whom he renewed the innocence of Paradise for a fallen race: ask it through her intercession “who in the depths of the world’s winter first dared the adventure of God’s spring.”⁴ It was ever known that none who fled to her protection, implored her help, or sought her intercession was left unaided. Our Lady does not alter with time, for there is perpetual youth in her perpetual virginity, there is perpetual help and succour for all followers of Christ. Our Lady will welcome us with the same smile that welcomed S. Bernadette in Lourdes, with the same smile that welcomed the shepherds and wise men at Bethlehem, with the same smile that shone down on the Saviour of the world lying in the manger.

² Ronald A. Knox, *The Second Eve. University Sermons together with sermons preached on various occasions.* (Edited by Philip Caraman S.J.) New York, Sheed and Ward [1963] p.410

³ Ronald A. Knox, *The Flower of Our Race. Op cit University Sermons* p.125

⁴ *Ibid*