

**Homily for Vespers and Mass, Feast of the Immaculate Conception.
Westminster Cathedral, 8 December**

One reading from the Gospel of St Luke sets the scene for this Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is the passage, from the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel, known as the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel comes to Mary and greets her with the well-known words: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.'

There are points for us to ponder here.

The Angel's greeting to Mary is, more properly, translated as 'Mary, Rejoice!' This is so because the word used is drawn from the Greek tradition of greetings, rather than the Hebrew tradition. Indeed, if it had been a Jewish greeting, the word used would have been 'Peace', 'Shalom'. But it is Rejoice!

Already, in these very first words of the Gospel message, there is an openness beyond the Hebrew world in which they take place. Already there is a strong hint that this message, of God's loving presence among us, is for all people. No-one is to be excluded. It is a message of joy for all.

The source of this joy is also clear: through Mary one is to come who will embody this presence of the Lord in our midst. She has a special, unique role in the unfolding of this plan of God. And she is given this role precisely as a woman.

Cardinal Hume reflected often on the genius of the feminine as seen in Mary. He wrote: 'It is a feminine trait to listen, to receive, to watch. Perhaps that is why more women pray than men. Perhaps that is why among contemplatives there are more women than men. It is a feminine trait, also, to see, to observe and to have a practical mind.'

Mary is prepared by God for this role of being mother to the Eternal Word made flesh. From the moment when her life took its beginning in the womb of her mother, St Anne, she was destined to be unique among the children of God. She was protected from that corrosive effect of original sin which marks all of us with a divided self, a conflict of desires and a weakness of will. This is the unique gift, given to her, which we celebrate on this Feast Day.

There is one consequence well expressed in the words of the Cardinal: 'We make a grave mistake in our spiritual lives if she has no part. Immaculately conceived, she is able to love as can no other creature: she has loved the God whom she served from early childhood, the Son whom she bore, and ourselves who, by this same Son, were commended to her at the most solemn moment of his life.'

Let us, then, allow her to accompany us. She can help us to prepare ourselves to recognise, in the child of Bethlehem, the Son of God who comes into our world for our sakes. Let us walk with her in prayer and accept the repeated invitation of Advent that we remain alert, watchful with joyful expectation, for the coming of the Lord. He is the one who will set his people free from sin. Amen.

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+ Vincent Nichols