

Sunday in the Octave of Christmas (Christmas I)

The Rev. Dcn. C. Lance Davis

“Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, *and shall bring forth* a Son.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

In the final week of Advent leading up to Christmas, the Church’s liturgy gives us a series of short prayers sung before and after the Magnificat at Evensong known as the great “O Antiphons”. These are a series of messianic titles, taken largely from Isaiah, and applied to our Lord: he is “Wisdom,” the “Key of David,” “the Day-spring,” the “King of the Nations”. It was these antiphons that inspired the popular carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”. Dating from the late sixth-century, these ancient texts have enjoyed a perennial popularity throughout the Western Catholic world.

Our Anglican patrimony, however, has a slight variation in the O Antiphons from those of our Roman brethren. Harkening back to mediaeval English usage, our Prayer-Books add an eighth antiphon to the end of this series, called *O Virgo Virginum*: “O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be? For neither before thee was any

like thee, nor shall there be after. Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me? The thing which ye behold is a divine mystery.”

When Dr. Cranmer translated and compiled the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549, he composed an entirely new collect for Christmas, as we heard just a few moments ago: “Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin...” What’s curious here is that not only does he describe Our Lady as a *virgin*, but as a *pure* virgin; an oxymoron, is it not? After all, one is either a virgin or one isn’t. What Cranmer is attempting to convey with this phrasing is something expressed in more explicit language a century later in 1688 by the then-Archbishop of Canterbury William Wake. Delivering a sermon on the Church of England’s understanding of Mary, he said, “We believe her to have been a most pure, and holy, and virtuous creature: that her virgin mind was clean and spotless, as her body chaste and immaculate; and that she was upon the account of both, the most fit of any of her race or sex for the Holy Ghost to over-shadow, and for the Son of the most highest to inhabit.”¹

Both Dr. Cranmer and Archbishop Wake were intending to convey that Mary’s purity of body—her virginity—is an outward manifestation of her inward purity of soul. This same teaching is expressed in the Preface for Christmas, where the priest prays,

¹ https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_sermons-and-discourses-o_wake-william_1716/page/308/mode/2up?q=pure ; pg. 309

“Because thou didst give Jesus Christ, thine only Son, to be born as at this time for us; who, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man, of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother; and that without spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin.” The Prayer-Book teaches that the very substance of the Virgin Mary—the source of God the Word’s incarnate humanity—was without spot of sin. And indeed it is the conviction not only of the Fathers of the early Church, of the texts of our liturgies, but also of the 16th-century Protestant Reformers, that Our Lady’s physical and spiritual spotlessness endured throughout the entirety of her earthly life.

St. Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan, writing in the year 388 says, “Mary [is] a Virgin not only undefiled, but a Virgin whom grace has made inviolate, free of every stain of sin.”²

St. Leo in 461 proclaims, “And by a new nativity [Christ] was begotten, conceived by a Virgin, born of a Virgin, without paternal desire, without injury to the mother’s chastity ... not by intercourse with man, but by the power of God was [the Incarnation] brought about: for a Virgin conceived, a Virgin bare, and a Virgin she remained.”³

The Greek liturgies of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom call Our Lady *panagia*, the all-holy one. She is the God-bearer, more

² Ambrose, Sermon 22:30 (A.D. 388).

³ Pope Leo the Great (regn. A.D. 440-461), On the Feast of the Nativity, Sermon 22:2 (ante A.D. 461).

honourable than the cherubim, beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim.

Martin Luther made the direct assertion in 1522, five years after he began his religious revolution, that “[Mary] is full of grace, proclaimed to be entirely without sin. ... God's grace fills her with everything good and makes her devoid of all evil.”⁴

That same year, the radical Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli upheld the Church’s historic belief when he argued, “To deny that Mary remained *inviolata* before, during, and after the birth of her Son, [is] to doubt the omnipotence of God ... [for] God esteemed Mary above all creatures, including the saints and angels—it [is] her purity, innocence, and invincible faith that mankind must follow.”⁵

Anglicans, as heirs of the patristic and Catholic faith, also continue to hold this belief. John Pearson, the 17th-century Anglican Bishop of Chester, wrote in his book *An Exposition of the Creed* that “We believe the Mother of our Lord to have been not only before and after his Nativity, but also for ever, the most immaculate and blessed Virgin.” Cranmer himself argued forcefully that the Church’s confession of Mary’s perpetual physical and spiritual purity is a mandatory belief—like that of the Trinity—being that it can be demonstrated from a plain reading of the

⁴ Luther's Works, American edition, vol. 43, p. 40, ed. H. Lehmann, Fortress, 1968.

⁵ G. R. Potter, *Zwingli*, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976, pp.88-9,395 / *The Perpetual Virginity of Mary* . . . , Sep. 17, 1522

Scriptures, from the teaching of the ancient Fathers, and from the decrees of the ecumenical councils.

At this point, it would be fair to ask why—aside from its factual veracity—any of this matters. I might suggest the doctrine of Our Lady’s purity teaches at least two important truths:

First, Mary’s virginity manifests God’s absolute initiative in salvation and his total sovereignty over all creation. “How shall this be?” Mary asks, “for I know not a man.” A strange question if she and St. Joseph were intending to live a normal married life. “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee,” says St. Gabriel, “for with God, nothing shall be impossible”. Our Lord is born “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”. The virginal conception and birth of Christ, prophesied by Isaiah, is a divine work foreordained from the foundation of the world. The virgin soil of Mary, watered by the dew of the Holy Ghost, germinates the New Eden, the Church; from her flesh springs the Tree of Life, whose fruit—the precious Body and Blood of Christ—is the remedy for death and the medicine of immortality. Mary is the new Eve, from whose side is borne the New Adam. In Christ’s Incarnation, humanity receives a new head, and the curse is blotted out. Eve’s disobedience brought forth thorns in the earth and corruption in the soul; Mary’s obedience heals Eve’s wound; her purity cleanses Eve’s defilement; thus, as St. Thomas Aquinas

argues, it would have been wholly unfitting for Christ's birth to have come at the cost of polluting Mary's integrity. As St. Augustine says, "Far be it that He who repairs in [us] the harm wrought by Eve should even in the slightest degree mar [virginity] in His Mother Mary."⁶ Christ's work in Our Lady is not the result of her own merits, but rather is the consequence of his unbounded love and grace. As God spake to the prophet Jeremiah, so Our Lord speaks to Mary: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee."

Second, Mary's spotlessness of body and soul reveals her to be the highest model of Christian perfection, the archetype of holiness. Our Lady's pure, sinless life demonstrates the full implications of Christ's Incarnation for each and every one of us. Mary's virginity shows that the salvation wrought by Christ affects not only the spiritual realm, but the physical as well. She is a sacramental witness to the future restored creation when God shall be "all in all" and physical corruption will be done away. Her *fiat*—be it unto me according to thy word—is an act of total submission to God's plan for her life. Her virginity is the sign of a faith unadulterated by any doubt, and of her undivided gift of herself to God's will. It is this faith that enables her to become the mother of the Saviour; and because of this faith, Our Lady conceives Christ

⁶ Augustine, Sermon 191 on the Nativity: "The Lord was, indeed, born of a woman, but He was conceived in her without man's co-operation. He who has offered to you this blessing of virginity to cherish did not deprive His Mother of that gift. Far be it that He who repairs in you the harm wrought by Eve should even in the slightest degree mar in His Mother Mary that virginity which you have prized."

in her soul before she conceives him in her womb. In her, God reveals his purpose for every single person who has or will ever live: complete conformity to the image of his Son. She is the icon of the Church: singularly dedicated to her one Bridegroom. In short, Mary is what every Christian ought to be: full of grace, entirely devoted to Christ. Mary's purity is to be our purity; her spotlessness will be our spotlessness; her fidelity shall be our fidelity; her glory, our glory.

“O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be? For neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after.” Amen.