

In the beginning was the Word...

An Advent & Christmas Course from the Diocese of Aberdeen & Orkney



Watch

Friday, 8th December 2023 (Feast of the Immaculate Conception)



Hunt, William Holman. *The Light of the World*. 1854. Keble College, University of Oxford

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And, behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'

And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God. And, behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her.

To reflect

Today marks the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Perhaps one of the more misunderstood festivals in the Church's Kalendar, this feast marks not the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary, but rather the conception of Mary, herself, in the womb of her mother, Anne. From as early as the 5th century, the Church has celebrated this particular event, seeing in the conception of Mary an especially beautiful and fitting miracle of the Lord. This miracle commemorates the moment when God, having chosen Mary before the foundation of the world to be the Mother of His Son, fashioned her in the womb of her mother to be – in body and soul – an holy, perfect, and worthy dwelling-place for the Word incarnate. We celebrate that, in this miraculous work of the Lord, Mary became the first one of us to be freed from the stain of original sin – that twist in the nature of fallen humanity which bends our will and action away from that of God – and, thus, filled with the grace to say 'Yes' to His call and receive Him into the temple that she had become. While, indeed, this particular and beautiful miracle is uniquely attributed to Mary, its effects – of a like beauty – are imparted to every one of us, too. For, the graces that Mary received at her conception have been, likewise, given to each one of us in Baptism. Through that great and first Sacrament, we also are made free from the bond of Adam's sin and formed as a worthy dwelling-place for the Lord of Hosts. Through Baptism, we – like Mary – become such vessels of God's grace that we may not only give our 'Yes', too, but likewise welcome the Lord into the temple that we have become.

The image chosen for today is Holman Hunt's famous *Light of the World*. Here, we find a depiction of the Lord standing at a door, His arm raised to knock. In the light of the pre-dawn sky, he appears at the house, searching for a place of welcome. The door has no handle; he cannot force His way in, but waits with patience – with hope – for an answer from within. In His hand, he carries a lamp. He would not wait until the sun rose, but took His light into the darkness, in search of those lost in the gloom. Upon His shoulders rests a royal mantle; upon His head, a crown of gold. This is, surely, the visit of a king. And yet, though a monarch robed in splendour, He stands barefoot on the threshold and humbly knocks for the person within.

In this Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we rejoice in God's choice and preparation of Mary to be the grace-filled dwelling-place for His Son. Replete with the graces later imparted to us through Baptism, she becomes the first disciple to open the door to Him who stands and knocks, and receive Him into the temple of herself. May we, in this holy season, remember our preparation for the same, and – in watchful hope for His knock – receive Him into the holy and 'grace-full' home that we, too, have become.

To pray

O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son; grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit; God, for ever and ever. Amen.

To listen

Joubert, John. *There is no rose of such virtue*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V92BLc2c900>.

Ord, Boris. *Adam lay ybounden*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oykLGvCfGCI>.

Willcocks, David (arr.). *Gabriel's Message*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF_RwXsWfJg.

des Prez, Josquin. *Ave Maria, Virgo Serena*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyGlFisv7Ng>.

The word for each day (3-25 December is taken from Advent Word 2023 #adventword).

...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.