

## Sermon for Lent III

The conclusion of today's Gospel may seem to startle us at first. This very mysterious passage, however, although at first it may seem to denigrate Mary's holiness, simply explains to us that Mary's faith is at the heart of her holiness. "A certain woman from the crowd, lifting up her voice, said to him: Blessed is the womb that bore thee ... But he said: Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it" (St. Luke 11:27-28). At first glance this might seem as if Our Lord were denying his Mother's holiness, or at least saying that although it might indeed be a special privilege to be his mother in the flesh, it would be even better to hear his words – as if Mary did not do that! On closer look, he was not denying her holiness but *explaining* it. We can see this if we compare it to another scene concerning Our Lord himself: "a certain man running up and kneeling before him, asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may receive life everlasting? And Jesus said to him, Why callest thou me good? None is good but God alone" (St. Mark 10:17-18). Of course, Our Lord was not denying that he is good: rather, he is explaining that, if he is good – really, goodness itself – it is precisely because he *is* God. Likewise, Mary is holy precisely because she *has* believed. "Blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord" (Lk 1:45).

Jesus Christ, according to St. Paul, is "the wisdom of God" (I Corinthians 1:24), the eternal Word by which God knows himself. And yet Scripture tells us, "wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sins" (Wisdom 1:4). Is it possible to believe for a moment that divine Wisdom itself could take on flesh in the womb of a being defiled and subject to sin?

We can see the promptness and purity of Mary's faith in the scene of the Annunciation: "Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father; and he shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever. And of his kingdom there shall be no end. And Mary said to the angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Luke 1:31-34). Without hesitation, Mary believes the angel's words; only she asks first how this great honour can be reconciled with her vow of virginity. Here also we see Mary's holiness, for, as Cardinal Newman remarks, "when the Angel announced to her that she was destined to have that blessedness which Jewish women had age after age looked out for, to be the Mother of the expected Christ, she did not seize the news, as another would, but she waited. She waited till she could be told it was consistent with her Virgin state. She was unwilling to accept this most

wonderful honour, unwilling till she could be satisfied on this point.”<sup>1</sup> And here we see the great superiority of Our Lady even to the great matriarchs of old: Mary preferred to be Christ’s servant than to be his Mother, and *for this reason precisely was she found worthy to be his Mother*.

Mary’s faith – so prompt, so humble, so docile – is at the root of all her other glories. And so it is that St. Elisabeth greets her with the words: “blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord” (Luke 1:45). It is because Mary has believed that she has become a fit instrument of God. That is why St. Augustine was able to say, “Mary heard God’s word and kept it, and so she is blessed. She kept God’s truth in her mind, a nobler thing [even] than carrying his body in her womb.”<sup>2</sup>

Three times, the Gospels tell us, “Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart” (*e.g.*, Luke 2:19). As a result of the Immaculate Conception, Mary’s mind was not clouded by original sin like ours: she was able to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of faith than even the greatest prophets. Seat of Wisdom, she recognized in her son the eternal son of God, before whose glory even the angels veil their faces: and she kept all these things in her heart. The Gospels present to us a Mary who is contemplating, a Mary who is always recollected and faithful, and not a Mary who is talking: certainly not a Mary who is chattering. This is a lesson for us as well. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). Just as the Word-made-flesh developed for nine months in the sanctuary of the Virgin’s womb, the bridal chamber where he wedded our human nature, before proceeding forth (*cf.* Psalm 18:6), likewise Mary’s faith matured in her heart before she shared it with the Church. The Psalmist tells us: “I have believed, *therefore* have I spoken” (115:10). According to Tradition it was the Virgin Mary herself who revealed to Saint Luke the details of Christ’s infancy and childhood recorded in the Gospel, and it was gathered around Our Lady that the first Christians prayed and waited in the upper room before the first Pentecost. Even now in recent centuries, Our Lady has come to us at Lourdes and Fatima to bring us back to the faith of Christ, the faith she pondered in her heart. Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us: “Even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one’s contemplation than merely to contemplate.”<sup>3</sup> Our Lady not only shines – adorned as she is with the sun as her garment and with twelve stars as her crown – she also lights up our path to heaven in this dark fallen world. Mary through her faith fulfils the angel’s promises: “no word shall be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

---

<sup>1</sup> Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1848.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon 25. See other references in John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), note 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa theologiae*, II-II, Q. 188, art. 6.

Mark this well: no *word* shall be impossible with God. “Praise the name of the Lord. For he spoke, and they were made: he commanded, and they were created” (Psalm 148:5). God’s word is not only all-powerful: his Word is a divine person, who was “made flesh” (John 1:14) in the womb of Mary. Now, as ever, Mary’s message to us is the same: she invites us to receive Christ’s words – words which we can receive only from our Mother the Church – in faith and docility. She says to us today, as she said to the disciples of old: “Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye” (John 2:5).

This, I think, is why the Church gives us this Gospel today, not quite halfway through the period of Lent. The Church invites us during Lent to contemplate the face of Jesus *with Mary: Stabat Mater dolorosa*, “the Mother stood next to the cross.” Mary alone kept alive in her heart undiminished the faith in the resurrection even in the darkest moments of anguish beyond description. We accompany Our Lady of Sorrows during Lent so that, like her, we may by a living faith bear him in our heart. “O all ye that pass by the way, attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow; Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou most beautiful among women? whither is thy beloved turned aside, and we will seek him with thee?” (Lam 1:12; Cant 5:17).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.