

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception
December 8, 2016
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In the Northern Hemisphere the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception occurs at the beginning of the winter season. And yet the event we commemorate and praise marks the return to the *springtime* of God's relationship to the human race.

When the Old Testament prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (11:1) this was referring to the old kingly dynasty of Judaea. Jesse was King David's father. And David's reign marked the high-water mark in Israel's political power and influence. After David, Old Testament history is a long and sad account of slow decline. That history, without the New Covenant, ends with the Jews as nothing more than a tiny dependency on the fringe of the Roman Empire. And Holy Scripture makes it clear the reason for this decline was Israel's rebellion from the Word of God. The unfaithfulness of the people issued in military defeats, forced exile of the population, and, as a consequence, further apostasy. When Isaiah surveyed the situation the ruling house of Jesse had long since disappeared. The prophet compared the former glory and present sad state of affairs to a common sight: an old tree stump. This image was instantly recognized by anyone taking a walk in the woods.

When my family lived in Brighton we had a perfect little garden patch snug up against the house. Bounded by the corner walls of the house and a staircase, this garden area was protected from the wind. And facing southeast, it soaked in all the midday sunlight. In this little area we looked for the first signs of spring: the shoots of spring bulbs coming up out of the ground. These were the tips of crocuses, snowdrops, tulips and some other bulbs which had been dormant in the frozen ground under snow and dead leaves. The sun melting the snow and warming the cozy blanket of dead leaves had promoted new growth. No matter how early we looked it was never early enough! The new shoots had already pushed up through the snow and sometimes right through the leaves. This was a welcome harbinger of spring. In Boston we knew full well there was plenty of winter potential remaining. We didn't put away the snow shovels! But we also knew it was just a matter of time before the garden would be in bloom.

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Besides the old dead tree trunk, there was something else in Isaiah's vision. He saw a rod or shoot, a fresh green sapling, coming forth as a single slender branch. And later, in another inspiration come from God. Isaiah declared that a young woman would conceive and bear a Son and give Him a highly unusual, if not unique, name which means "*God With Us.*"

Isaiah's vision is the hinge story in early salvation history. And we know now what the old prophet could only glimpse far off: that the single and slender branch was *a girl named Mary*. And in her virgin innocence and spotless motherhood she was the branch that bore the blossom which was to redeem mankind and make it burst once again into flower.

In my Brighton garden I always seemed to begin looking too late for spring life. The tips of the first shoots had already broken the surface by the time we even thought to brush back any snow and leaves and take a peek. It had all happened quietly, and out of sight. When Our Lady was conceived, our salvation was already in the bud. God's wonderful plan was silently at work. But the event was not recorded in Scripture. No one noticed. There were no angels to sing over the hills. No shepherds left their flocks to come and see. No Wise Men followed the stars to a Child. And yet the Coming of Christ began with this event we celebrate today. Our Blessed Lady is the consummation of the Old Testament, and with her Immaculate Conception the whole cycle of history began again in a new creation.

Before He created the first man, Adam, Almighty God made preparation for human life. You remember that it was the sixth day, and the Lord God fashioned with great care a perfect paradise called The Garden of Eden. And we know what happened there! But in the fullness of time the Lord restored our fallen human nature in a New Man, the second Adam Who is His Own Blessed Son. And just as at the first creation, the Lord God provided a paradise for the well-being of the second Adam. But this time the paradise garden was the human life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was winter for mankind in the world, when in the quiet and holy home where Saint Anne gave birth to her daughter, *springtime had arrived.*