

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception
December 8, 2020

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“What things soever were written, were written for our learning, that, through patience and the comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope.” So wrote St Paul to the Romans. (15:4) Those scriptures were what you and I call the Old Testament. They were the whole Bible when St Paul wrote his epistles. And when the New Testament was put in written form, it understandably contained constant reference to that Bible. We read over and over again phrases as: “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet” and “according to the scriptures.” In the early Church it was almost the first object of writers and preachers to prove Our Lord’s life fulfilled in every detail what had been prophesied about It.

Those prophets foretold a virgin would conceive and bear a son. Messiah would come out of Egypt. Kings from the East would find their way west to worship Him. He would be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He would heal the sick and preach. He would enter His Own city riding upon a donkey. He would be rejected, cast out of the city, and murdered by those He came to save. These Old Testament predictions made up the early Christian preaching. From them the Church showed Almighty God preparing His people for the Divine Mission of His Son.

Holy Church tells us not to forget that Christ came “according to the scriptures.” In Advent, the Church displays these credentials in the appointed lessons at her services, and in preaching. Notable among this Advent method and reminder is the linking of the “Great O Antiphons” with Our Lady’s *Magnificat* at Vespers during the last weeks before Christmas. In a brief phrase each day we are given what the Jews had been told to expect. Then we sing Mary’s song of how it began to happen. (If you are not in the habit of reading Vespers, you can still appreciate the “Great O Antiphons” in the words of the Advent hymn “*Veni emmanuel.*”

The Solemnity of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception honors the first sign that salvation, long hoped for and predicted, was in the works. The die was cast, even before anyone noticed. Just as the first shoots in springtime go unnoticed in the frost-bound winter, hiding under a mat of dead leaves and snow, so in a world of great sinfulness, there was a single spotless conception going undetected. Just as

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winter prevents our looking for the first signs of spring, so too sinfulness dulls the world's perception of holiness. When Mary was conceived no angels sang, no shepherds visited; there were no wise men and no star. Those things were reserved for the birth of her Divine Son.

But all was set in motion at Mary's conception. At that moment a new cycle of history began and all the longings foretold in the Old Testament came to consummation. For just as Almighty God had prepared a setting for Adam and Eve by placing them in a paradise garden, once more He began by making preparation. This time the paradise garden was the body and soul of Our Blessed Lady. Mary herself would be the sinless paradise for God Incarnate. How could the Sinless One take flesh from any other source? And so in advance, Our Blessed Lady Mary received all the benefits Christ won for the rest of us on the Cross. The winter of sin was all around fallen human nature. But in the quiet home where two people named Joachim and Anna lived, the springtime of creation came, and was all but unnoticed.

God is the Father of creation. Mary is the mother of the *recreated* world. God gave life. But His will was that a spotless maiden named Mary would be the mother through whom all things are given new life. And it happened "according to the scriptures." That new life, born of Mary, comes to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.