

Third Sunday in Lent, 24th March 2019

I am sure that we are all familiar with Our Lady being associated with the season of Advent, in its lead up to Christmas, but what about Our Lady and Lent? Tomorrow, 25th March, the Church will in fact be celebrating the Annunciation, Lady Day itself, yet it seems to be something of an intrusion into our more sombre celebration of Lent. Nevertheless, how exactly does Our Lady slot in, as it were, into the whole spirit of this penitential season?

Enter today's Gospel or, more precisely, the end of today's Gospel: "And it came to pass, as he spoke these things, a certain woman from the crowd, lifting up her voice, said to him: Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck. But he said: Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it" (Lk 11:27-28). These words, from St Luke, form the Gospel reading for most Saturday Votive Masses of Our Lady, and therefore they exemplify what she is all about: hearing the word of God and keeping it. And yet we really only get the tail end of the story: "it came to pass, as he spoke these things [...]" (Lk 11:27) – What "things" was he speaking about? Well, all about an unclean spirit who, after having been cast out of a man, wanders until it decides to return with seven wickeder spirits (cf. Lk 11:24-26); a parable reproduced virtually word for word in St Matthew's Gospel (cf. 12:43-45).

I read St Matthew's version of the return of the unclean spirit not so long ago at Mass: a week and a half ago, on Ember Wednesday, during the 7pm Latin Mass at Belmont (which unfortunately coincides with your chant practice). Again, this version of the parable has an interruption, and not only that; but an interruption which is also related to Our Blessed Lady, and this time Our Lady in person: "As he was yet speaking to the multitudes, behold his mother and his brethren stood without, seeking to speak to him" (Mt 12:46). What was it then about the things Our Lord "was speaking to the multitudes" about which may have prompted the presence of "his mother", or indeed praise of his mother: "Blessed is the womb that bore thee" (Lk 11:27)?

Jesus was in the process of refuting perhaps the most outrageous accusation which so far had to face: "some of them said: He casteth out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of devils" (Lk 11:15). They were suggesting that he was not even on the side of God, never mind the Son of God, but rather on the side of the devil. And yet we know that he had so strenuously resisted the devil's temptations, as we heard two weeks ago. They, in contrast, sought slanderously to question who he was; where he came from; what he stood for. They were saying that he was effectively cursed by God, fit to share the same fate as the devil and his angels; the woman from the crowd, in St Luke's Gospel, however, counteracted this curse with a blessing: "Blessed is the womb [...]" (Lk 11:27).

As well as this blessing, the appearance on the scene of Our Lady, in St Matthew's Gospel, helps further to explain the blessedness of Christ's origins. While St Luke, in today's Gospel, had the woman in her blessing extol "the womb" and Our Lord in turn intimating that it was not so much his mother's "womb" as her ear and heart: "blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it" (Lk 11:28); St Matthew has here not only Christ's earthly Mother but also his heavenly Father: "whosoever shall do the will of my Father, that is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:50). The fact that Jesus has one Father, "in heaven", is further emphasised by his missing out 'father' from the subsequent list: "brother, and sister, and mother".

If the Father is characterised as being "in heaven"; the Mother is characterised as doing his "will", surely bringing to mind Our Lady's response to the angel, which will be heard tomorrow in the Gospel of the Annunciation: "*Ecce ancilla Domini: fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* (Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word)" (Lk 1:38). Such is Christ's Mother; and if we truly want to be his brothers and sisters, we must follow her example, as well as his, by echoing her "*fiat*" in our prayer to the Father "who art in heaven" (Mt 6:9): "*fiat voluntas tua* (Thy will be done)" (Mt 6:10). What could be more appropriate for Lent than praying that God's will, God's word, may be fulfilled in us?



There was absolutely nothing, despite appearances to the contrary, robotic about Our Lady's following of the will of God; her doing of his will was the result of her own free will, and also of her reflecting upon the word of God which was spoken to her: "having heard, [she] was troubled at his saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be" (Lk 1:29). And it is not only at the Annunciation, but also at the Nativity: "Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19); and then at the Finding in the Temple: "his mother kept all these words in her heart" (Lk 2:51) – she "kept all these words". And what does the Son declare later on in St Luke's Gospel concerning his Mother? – "blessed are they who hear the word of God, and keep it" (Lk 11:28) – she kept that "word" in thought, in word, and indeed also in deed.