

Tuesday Reflection 08 December 2020 - Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Today we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the God-bearer. This is one of those teachings of the Church which are often misunderstood by non-Catholics, who often confuse it with the Virgin Birth. The Gospel for today is St Luke's account of the Annunciation, and while reading around for material for this reflection, I came across a source of devotion to Our Lady from a - for me - unexpected source: Islam. The Koran (Quran) not only celebrates Jesus as a great prophet, but also devotes a whole section to Maryam (Mary), His Mother (in fact, as some Islamic scholars point out, there is more written about Mary in the Quran than in the Bible). The parallels between the two texts are quite striking, particularly around the story of the Annunciation.

St Luke writes (1:28): "The angel went to her and said 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'"

The Quran (3:42) "Behold the angels said: 'O Mary, Allah has chosen you and purified you - chosen you above the women of all nations.'"

St Luke (1:30-32) "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

The Quran (3:45) "Behold! The angels said: 'O Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him: His name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of those nearest to Allah.'"

And to Mary's justified objection that she was a virgin:

St Luke (1:34-35) "'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'"

The Quran (3:47) "She said: 'O my Lord! how shall I have a son when no man has touched me?' He said 'Even so: Allah creates what He wills: when He has decreed a Plan, He but says to it, 'Be' and it is!'"

Drawing attention to these similarities does not of course detract from the many profound doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam - particularly in the issue of the Divinity of Christ and His Death and Resurrection, but if we are to enter into a serious dialogue with our Muslim sisters and brothers, then perhaps Our Lady is not a bad place to start.

Like Christians, Muslims believe in a Second Coming of Jesus at the end of time, which will herald the reconciliation between Muslims and Christians. Perhaps with the help of Our Lady we can start that work of reconciliation now.

Michael Townson