Mary: A December Feast

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'Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the kings horses and all the kings men, couldn't put humpty together again.'

And so the nursery rhyme goes … but God can and God will. No matter how messed up our life has become, we all need to realise we are made by God, loved by God, held by God and forgiven by God.

'Handmade' is a phrase we will often see these December days as we turn to shopping for gifts. 'Handmade' is on a par with the word 'organic' or 'original'. All suggesting that there is nothing false, artificial or fake in the particular item we are considering purchasing.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December, is a hard one for many to understand. It's often confused with the birth of Christ and his conception, but the dates simply don't add up! 8 December is all about Mary and how she was handmade to give birth to Jesus from her own conception. In other words, sinless from the very beginning, from her time in the womb of her mother, Anne.

We are not handmade, but we are made in God's image and likeness. While not one of us is sinless like Our Lady, we are very special in her eyes.

Luke's gospel for this December feast brings us upfront with the mystery of the Rosary we know as the Annunciation – the visit of the Angel Gabriel to a young woman by the name of Mary who lived in Nazareth. From that gospel text we get the very well-known phrase, often repeated in the Roman Missal, 'The Lord is with you' (Lk 1:28) – in the Missal we pray, 'the Lord be with you.' If we remember just that in life – that the Lord is with us, holding us, has our back – it will be



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Annunciation, Leonardo da Vinci, circa 1472, The Uffizi Gallery, Italy

a huge comfort to us, and we won't go too far wrong.

Mary responded to God's call through the voice of the angel Gabriel. It was an unflinching yes. Yes to being the mother of Jesus. Yes to allowing her womb carry his body. Yes to acknowledging that from the earliest moment she was handmade!

There is a humility in her response. She was afraid, she was anxious, she was unsure, but she trusted all the time in God. In Scripture we meet another man who offers a lesson on humility – the centurion who was anxious about his servant. He is the one we credit with giving us the response we say just before Holy Communion: 'Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof!' It's even more beautiful in Irish: *A Thiarna, ní fiú mé go dtiocfá faoi mo dhíon, ach abairse an focal agus leigheasfar m'anam*. Mary was saying the same to the angel Gabriel, and indeed to God, to allow his Son to enter the inner pocket of her womb.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception comes 17 days before we celebrate Christ's birth. In this December feast we are honouring Mary, handmade to bring the Son of God into our world. December is as much Mary's month as it is the month we gather to celebrate the birth of her Son.