

1 "Our Lady in the Gospel"
2 *Faith and Prejudice* sermon 7
3 St. John Henry Newman
4 March 26, 1848

5 There is a passage in the Gospel of this day, which may have struck many of us as
6 needing some illustration. While our Lord was preaching, a woman in the crowd cried
7 out, "Blessed is the womb that bore Thee and the breasts which Thou hast sucked"
8 (Luke 11). Our Lord assents, but instead of dwelling on the good words of this woman,
9 He goes on to say something further. He speaks of a greater blessedness. "Yea," He
10 says, "but blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." Now these words of
11 our Lord require notice, if it were only for this reason, because there are many persons
12 nowadays who think they are said in depreciation of the glory and blessedness of the
13 Most Holy Virgin Mary; as if our Lord had said, "My Mother is blessed, but my true
14 servants are more blessed than she is." I shall say some words then on this passage,
15 and with a peculiar fitness, because we have just passed the festival of Lady Day, the
16 great feast on which we commemorate the Annunciation, that is, the visit of the Angel
17 Gabriel to her, and the miraculous conception of the Son of God, her Lord and Saviour,
18 in her womb.

19 Now a very few words will be sufficient to show that our Lord's words are no
20 disparagement to the dignity and glory of His Mother, as the first of creatures and the
21 Queen of all Saints. For consider, He says that it is a more blessed thing to keep His
22 commandments than to be His Mother, and do you think that the Most Holy Mother of
23 God did not keep the commandments of God? Of course no one, no Protestant even—
24 no one will deny she did. Well, if so, what our Lord says is that the Blessed Virgin
25 was *more* blessed in that she kept His commandments than because she was His
26 Mother. And what Catholic denies this? On the contrary we all confess it. All Catholics
27 confess it. The Holy Fathers of the Church tell us again and again that our Lady was
28 more blessed in doing God's will than in being His Mother. She was blessed in two
29 ways. She was blessed in being His Mother; she was blessed in being filled with the
30 spirit of faith and obedience. And the latter blessedness was the greater. I say the Holy
31 Fathers say so expressly. St. Augustine says, "More blessed was Mary in receiving the
32 faith of Christ, than in receiving the flesh of Christ." In like manner St. Elizabeth says to
33 her at the Visitation, "*Beata es quae credidisti*, Blessed art thou who didst believe"; and
34 St. Chrysostom goes so far as to say that she would not have been blessed, even
35 though she had borne Christ in the body, unless she had heard the word of God and
36 kept it.

37 Now I have used the expression "St. Chrysostom goes *so far* as to say," not that it is not
38 a plain truth. I say, it is a plain truth that the Blessed Virgin would not have been
39 blessed, though she had been the Mother of God, if she had not done His will, but it is
40 an extreme thing to say, for it is supposing a thing impossible, it is supposing that she
41 could be so highly favoured and yet not be inhabited and possessed by God's grace,
42 whereas the Angel, when he came, expressly hailed her as full of grace. "*Ave, gratia*
43 *plena*." The two blessednesses cannot be divided. (Still it is remarkable that she herself
44 had an opportunity of contrasting and dividing them, and that she preferred to keep

45 God's commandments to being His Mother, if she could not have both.) She who was
46 chosen to be the Mother of God was also chosen to be *gratia plena*, full of grace. This
47 you see is an explanation of those high doctrines which are received among Catholics
48 concerning the purity and sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin. St. Augustine will not listen
49 to the notion that she ever committed sin, and the Holy Council of Trent declares that by
50 special privilege she through all her life avoided all, even venial sin. And at this time you
51 know it is the received belief of Catholics that she was not conceived in original sin, and
52 that her conception was immaculate.

53 Whence come these doctrines? They come from the great principle contained in our
54 Lord's words on which I am commenting. He says, "More blessed is it to do God's will
55 than to be God's Mother." Do not say that Catholics do not feel this deeply—so deeply
56 do they feel it that they are ever enlarging on her virginity, purity, immaculateness, faith,
57 humility and obedience. Never say then that Catholics forget this passage of Scripture.
58 Whenever they keep the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the Purity, or the like,
59 recollect it is because they make so much of the blessedness of sanctity. The woman in
60 the crowd cried out, "Blessed is the womb and the breasts of Mary." She spoke in faith;
61 she did not mean to exclude her higher blessedness, but her words only went a certain
62 way. Therefore our Lord completed them. And therefore His Church after Him, dwelling
63 on the great and sacred mystery of His Incarnation, has ever felt that she, who so
64 immediately ministered to it, must have been most holy. And therefore for the honour of
65 the Son she has ever extolled the glory of the Mother. As we give Him of our best,
66 ascribe to Him what is best, as on earth we make our churches costly and beautiful; as
67 when He was taken down from the cross, His pious servants wrapped Him in fine linen,
68 and laid Him in a tomb in which never man was laid; as His dwelling place in heaven is
69 pure and stainless—so much more ought to be—so much more was—that tabernacle
70 from which He took flesh, in which He lay, holy and immaculate and divine. As a body
71 was prepared for Him, so was the place of that body prepared also. Before the Blessed
72 Mary could be Mother of God, and in order to her being Mother, she was set apart,
73 sanctified, filled with grace, and made meet for the presence of the Eternal.

74 And the Holy Fathers have ever gathered the exact obedience and the sinlessness of
75 the Blessed Virgin from the very narrative of the Annunciation, when she became the
76 Mother of God. For when the Angel appeared to her and declared to her the will of God,
77 they say that she displayed especially four graces, humility, faith, obedience and purity.
78 Nay, these graces were as it were, preparatory conditions to her being made the
79 minister of so high a dispensation. So that if she had not had faith, and humility, and
80 purity, and obedience, she would not have merited to be God's Mother. Thus it is
81 common to say that she conceived Christ in mind before she conceived Him in body,
82 meaning that the blessedness of faith and obedience preceded the blessedness of
83 being a Virgin Mother. Nay, they even say that God waited for her consent before He
84 came into her and took flesh of her. Just as He did no mighty works in one place
85 because they had not faith, so this great miracle, by which He became the Son of a
86 creature, was suspended till she was tried and found meet for it—till she obeyed.
87 But there is something more to be added to this. I said just now that the two
88 blessednesses could not be divided, that they went together. "Blessed is the womb,"
89 etc.; "Yea, rather blessed," etc. It is true, but observe this. The Holy Fathers always
90 teach that in the Annunciation, when the Angel appeared to our Lady, she showed that

91 she preferred what our Lord called the greater of the two blessednesses to the other.
92 For when the Angel announced to her that she was destined to have that blessedness
93 which Jewish women had age after age looked out for, to be the Mother of the expected
94 Christ, she did not seize the news, as another would, but she waited. She waited till she
95 could be told it was consistent with her Virgin state. She was unwilling to accept this
96 most wonderful honour, unwilling till she could be satisfied on this point. "How shall this
97 be, since I know not man?" They consider that she had made a vow of virginity, and
98 considered that holy estate a greater thing than to bear the Christ. Such is the teaching
99 of the Church, showing distinctly how closely she observes the doctrine of the words of
100 Scripture on which I am commenting, how intimately she considers that the Blessed
101 Mary felt them, viz. that though blessed was the womb that bore Christ and the breasts
102 which He sucked, yet more blessed was the soul which owned that womb and those
103 breasts, more blessed was the soul full of grace, which because it was so gracious was
104 rewarded with the extraordinary privilege to be made the Mother of God.
105 But now a further question arises, which it may be worth considering. It may be asked,
106 Why did our blessed Lord even *seem* to extenuate the honour and privilege of His
107 Mother? When the woman said, "Blessed is the womb," etc., He answered indeed,
108 "Yea." But He went on, "Yea, rather blessed." And on another occasion, if not on this,
109 He said when someone told Him that His Mother and brethren were without, "Who is My
110 Mother?" etc. And at an earlier time, when He began His miracles, and His Mother told
111 Him that the guests in the marriage feast had no wine, He said, "Woman, what have I to
112 do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." These passages seem to be coldly worded
113 towards the Blessed Virgin, even though the sense may be satisfactorily explained.
114 What then do they mean? Why did He so speak?
115 Now I shall give two reasons in explanation:
116 1. The first which more immediately rises out of what I have been saying is this: that for
117 many centuries the Jewish women had looked out each of them to be the Mother of the
118 expected Christ, and had not associated it apparently with any higher sanctity.
119 Therefore they had been so desirous of marriage; therefore marriage was held in such
120 special honour by them. Now marriage is an ordinance of God, and Christ has made it a
121 sacrament—yet there is a higher state, and that the Jews did not understand. Their
122 whole idea was to associate religion with pleasures of this world. They did not know,
123 commonly speaking, what it was to give up this world for the next. They did not
124 understand that poverty was better than riches, ill name than good name, fast and
125 abstinence than feasting, and virginity than marriage. And therefore when the woman in
126 the crowd cried out upon the blessedness of the womb that bore Him and the breasts
127 that He had sucked, He taught her and all who heard Him that the soul was greater than
128 the body, and that to be united to Him in spirit was more than to be united to Him in
129 flesh.
130 2. This is one reason, and the other is more interesting to us. You know that our Saviour
131 for the first thirty years of His earthly life lived under the same roof as His Mother. When
132 He returned from Jerusalem at the age of twelve with her and St. Joseph, it is expressly
133 said that He was subject to them. This is a very strong expression, but that subjection,
134 that familiar family life, was not to last to the end. Even on the occasion upon which the
135 Evangelist says that He was subject to them, He had said and done what emphatically
136 conveyed to them that He had other duties. For He had left them and stayed in the

137 Temple among the doctors, and when they expressed surprise, He answered, "Wist ye
138 not that I ought to be in the things which are My Father's?" This was, I say, an
139 anticipation of the time of His Ministry, when He was to leave His home. For thirty years
140 He remained there, but, as He was steadily observant of His home duties, while they
141 were His duties, so was He zealous about His Father's work, when the time came for
142 His performing it. When the time of His mission came, He left His home and His Mother
143 and, dear as she was to Him, He put her aside.

144 In the Old Testament the Levites are praised because they knew not father or mother,
145 when duty to God came in the way. "Who said to his father and to his mother, I know
146 you not, and to his brothers, I am ignorant of you" (Deut. 33). "They knew not their
147 children." If such was the conduct of the sacerdotal tribe under the Law, well did it
148 become the great and one Priest of the New Covenant to give a pattern of that virtue
149 which was found and rewarded in Levi. He too Himself has said, "He who loveth father
150 or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me." And He tells us that "every one who hath
151 left home or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for His
152 name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold and shall possess eternal life" (Matt. 19). It
153 became then Him who gave the precept to set the example, and as He told his followers
154 to leave all they had for the Kingdom's sake, *in His own Person* to do all that He could,
155 to leave all He had, to leave His home and His Mother, when He had to preach the
156 Gospel.

157 Therefore it was that from the beginning of His ministry, He gave up His Mother. At the
158 time He did His first miracle, He proclaimed it. He did that miracle at her bidding, but He
159 implied, or rather declared, that He was then beginning to separate from her. He said,
160 "What is between Me and thee?" And again, "My hour is not yet come," that is, The hour
161 cometh when I shall acknowledge thee again, O my Mother. The hour cometh when
162 thou rightly and powerfully wilt intercede with Me. The hour cometh when at thy bidding
163 I will do miracles: it cometh, but it is not yet come. And till it is come "What is between
164 thee and Me? I know thee not. For the time I have forgotten thee."

165 From that time we have no record of His seeing His Mother till He saw her under His
166 Cross. He parted with her. Once she tried to see Him. A report went about that He was
167 beside Himself. His friends went out to get possession of Him. The Blessed Virgin
168 apparently did not like to be left behind. She went Out too. A message came to Him that
169 they were seeking Him, could not reach Him for the press. Then He said those serious
170 words, "Who is My Mother?" etc., meaning, as it would appear, that He had left all for
171 God's service, and that, as for our sake He had been born of the Virgin, so for our sake
172 He gave up His Virgin Mother, that He might glorify His heavenly Father and do His
173 work.

174 Such was His separation from the Blessed Mary, but when on the Cross He said, "It is
175 finished," this time of separation was at an end. And therefore before it His blessed
176 Mother had joined Him, and He seeing her, recognized her again. His hour was come,
177 and He said to her of St. John, "Woman, behold thy son," and to St. John, "Behold thy
178 Mother."

179 And now, my Brethren, in conclusion I will but say one thing. I do not wish your words to
180 outrun your real feeling. I do not wish you to take up books containing the praises of the
181 Ever Blessed Virgin, and to use them and imitate them rashly without consideration. But
182 be sure of this, that if you cannot enter into the warmth of foreign books of devotion, it is

183 a deficiency in you. To use strong words will not mend the matter; it is a fault within
184 which can only gradually be overcome, but it is a deficiency, for this reason, if for no
185 other. Depend upon it, the way to enter into the sufferings of the Son, is to enter into the
186 sufferings of the Mother. Place yourselves at the foot of the Cross, see Mary standing
187 there, looking up and pierced with the sword. Imagine her feelings, make them your
188 own. Let her be your great pattern. Feel what she felt and you will worthily mourn over
189 the death and passion of your and her Saviour. Have her simple faith, and you will
190 believe well. Pray to be filled with the grace given to her. Alas, you must have many
191 feelings she had not, the feeling of personal sin, of personal sorrow, of contrition, and
192 self hate, but these will in a sinner naturally accompany the faith, the humility, the
193 simplicity which were her great ornaments. Lament with her, believe with her, and at
194 length you will experience her blessedness of which the text speaks. None indeed can
195 have her special prerogative, and be the Mother of the Highest, but you will have a
196 share in that blessedness of hers which is greater, the blessedness of doing God's will
197 and keeping His commandments.