

## **Mary Mother of God and the New Year Day, World Peace Day, January 01, 2017**

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

On the first day of the New Year we celebrate with joy the feast of Mary the Mother of God. At the same time we celebrate the feast of the Holy name of Jesus. The scriptures tell us that on the eighth day Jesus was circumcised and was given the name as told by the angel. The church celebrates this day as the world day of peace and invites us specially to pray for peace in the world. Mary is our model of faith, hope and prayer. By accepting her role as the divine mother she gave to the world the God-man who will be with us to the end of times. In the first reading we have God's people commencing their journey home and to live a new life. God blesses them and promises to be with them. God gives them peace and security. In the second reading Paul reminds us that God's Son has become one of through Mary. Through him we have become the children of God. We also become aware of Mary's dignity as the Mother of Jesus and an instrument of God. In the Gospel the Shepherds communicate to all the good news surrounding the birth of Jesus revealed to them by the angels. It is Mary who treasures them all in her heart. The Gospel also tells us that the Child was given the name that was chosen by God himself.

Today's special Feast affirms what we Catholics believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary truly is the Mother of God. This Catholic Dogma finds its origin in a Bible passage that is found in the Gospel of Luke. After the archangel Gabriel had appeared to the Blessed Virgin Mary, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Upon her arrival, Elizabeth said to Mary, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Through Elizabeth who was full of the Holy Spirit, it was proclaimed that Mary was truly the Mother of God. This Marian Feast of the Mother of God reaffirms the teachings of the early Church Councils, that Mary was the mother of Jesus who was both God and human. The Holy Bible supports the truth that Jesus was both God and human and he became one of us for our sake. In the Gospel of John we read, "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

In the First Reading from the Book of Numbers we heard of the Lord's blessing upon the Israelites. The Lord God is preparing the people of Israel for the journey toward the Promised Land. God has given them every advantage to make the journey to Canaan without any mishap. Occupying the central place throughout their journey is the Ark of the Covenant. Now Israel belongs to God through the covenant on Sinai. They are now given the privilege of pronouncing the name of God over the people which takes the form of a blessing. This blessing, in the form of a prayer, was frequently used by the priests when they blessed the people. The Lord spoke to Moses and asked him to speak to Aaron and his sons, giving them these words of Blessing: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.' This echoes a sign of the Divine pleasure, a time when the grace of God that results in peace. It shows God's favourable disposition towards them. The divine name appears over and over again in this blessing. God's graciousness will be plainly evident throughout their journey. This

blessing builds a special bond between God and his people. God's benevolence is a light shining on them like the sun to nourish them and guide their way. God's peace will protect them from all harm. He will be with them always and will bless them. Included in these benefits are divine protection, countless gifts and lasting peace.

In today's Second Reading Paul says that God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as children. The woman who bore Jesus is Mary. Since he is the son of God, she is rightly called Mother of God. Paul tells us that Jesus coming under the natural law has transformed us making us the children of God. No longer slaves and servants but heirs as sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus. As Paul says, with Jesus the Son, we now can, like him, address God the Father as "Abba", a term that implies deep intimacy and affection. The Spirit of God's Son has entered into our hearts and this Spirit enables us to call God Abba Father. They can now enjoy the freedom of the children of God. At the same time we become brothers and sisters of Jesus and thus become members of God's family in Jesus our brother and thus free from the constraints of the Law. In today's feast we need to remember that it is Mary who played a crucial role in the bridging of the gap between God and ourselves. Therefore Paul tells us that we must love one another, because love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love. Mary who is the beacon of love has transformed us into a family of love.

In today's Gospel Luke describes the simple scene in the stable at Bethlehem. The setting is of a peasant family with a new born child has found hospitality and shelter in a facility shared with farm animals. We see a man, a woman who has just given birth, and a baby Jesus lying in the manger. Truly primitive surroundings and yet this Baby is the Son of God and that young woman is the Mother of God. This is the great mystery of the Incarnation. Their first visitors are the shepherds, a group of poor and despised and marginalized people, indeed persons of low economic status, and the people God came especially to save and liberate. We are not sure whether those shepherds really understood the message given by the angels that a savior is born. But they obey the voice they heard and go in search of the child born to bring peace to the world. We often portray Mary as Queen of Heaven, dressed resplendently in beautiful clothes with crowns, jewels and stars. But I think this Gospel scene is the one that is most striking. It is the one that says the most about what God is doing for us through Jesus and through his Mother. No wonder that Luke says, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart". She had indeed a great deal to ponder about, give a careful thought to the message of the shepherds. There was much that now and in later years she would have to reflect on with regard to this Child of hers. The meaning of this event will only unfold over time. It will never be understood through intellect alone. This is a matter of the heart and pondering is a fitting process. The message is too big and the event is too powerful. It needs to be treasured and pondered. In a way this is Mary's greatest gift and sets the stage for why in the gospel tradition she is understood as the prominent model for Christian discipleship.

No sooner has this most extraordinary event taken place, than things move quickly to return to the ordinary. The Gospel ends with the description of the return of the shepherds to their fields and later goes and tells others what they had seen and all are amazed. The Gospel also tells of the traditional circumcision of the young child in accordance with the Law and, in fact, this feast used to be called that of the Circumcision. Here the child is given a name as every other Jewish family would do, a name chosen by God. This ritual would mark Jesus clearly as a child of Abraham. The whole early life of Jesus and, even much in his later life, takes place within the ambience of the Jewish Law. Nevertheless nothing will ever be the same again. The extraordinary has occurred in and through the ordinary. Mary is well aware of this and for her it is the time to ponder and contemplate. All this will be revealed to her in time. Mary, of course, is primarily the mother of Jesus. She contributes from her own body to the formation of his human body. She is the mother of Jesus. But the Gospel speaks of his Father being God, not Joseph.

Finally, just one more point. In recent years, today, the first day of the New Year, has been designated World Day of Peace. It is very appropriate because today's gospel story is filled with a beautiful peace. In fact, it was in response to the angels' song, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth", that the shepherds had gone in search of the baby in the manger. On this day, the Pope asks all of us to pray for peace and to work for peace. Pope Benedict XVI has dedicated this year's World Day of Peace to the theme of religious freedom. It is well known that in many parts of the world there are various forms of restriction or denial of religious freedom, from discrimination and marginalization based on religion, to acts of violence against religious minorities". Religious freedom is authentically realized when it is experienced as the coherent search for truth and for the truth about man. This approach to religious freedom offers us a fundamental criterion for discerning the phenomenon of religion and its expressions. It necessarily rejects the 'religiosity' of fundamentalism, and the manipulation of truth and of the truth about man. Since such distortions are opposed to the dignity of man and to the search for truth, they cannot be considered as religious freedom".

Further, the message tells us that today there are many areas of the world in which forms of restrictions and limitations to religious freedom persist, both where communities of believers are a minority, and where communities of believers are not a minority, and where more sophisticated forms of discrimination and marginalization exist, on the cultural level and in the spheres of public, civil and political activity. 'It is inconceivable', as Pope Benedict XVI remarked, 'that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights. The rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection if they are considered to clash with a prevailing secular ideology or with majority religious positions of an exclusive nature". The message of peace tells us that man cannot be fragmented, and separated from what he believes, because that in which he believes has an impact on his life and on his person. 'Refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and in the quest for the Absolute – by its nature, expressing communion between

persons – would effectively privilege an individualistic approach, and would fragment the unity of the person'. It is for this reason that: 'Religious Freedom is the Path to Peace'. All of us can and need to be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can all be peace-makers. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God."

This feast of Mary the Mother of God is closely connected to the feast of Christmas and is the most important and oldest of the feasts of Mary. It is based on the source of her privileges: her divine motherhood. Jesus Christ, God's Son "born of a woman," came to deliver us from sin and make us children of God. He is also Mary's Son, and she, his mother, helps bring his blessings to the world. She is "truly the Mother of God and of the Redeemer...not merely passively engaged by God, but freely cooperating in the work of our salvation through faith and obedience." Mary was not simply a passive instrument in God's hands; rather she discovered and accepted new dimensions to her motherhood as her life unfolded. This Solemnity of Mary Mother of God falls exactly one week after Christmas, the end of the octave of Christmas. It is fitting to honour Mary as Mother of Jesus, following the birth of Christ. Calling Mary "mother of God" is the highest honour we can give Mary. The story of the birth of Jesus is rounded out by the final required rituals of circumcision and naming. These actions formally incorporate Jesus into the family of Judaism and the chosen people of God. We see here God at work in his mysterious ways.

Today, we are starting a new day and a new year with inner knowledge and understanding of the greatness of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God. We greet each other with the same blessing as in the first reading of today: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you his peace. May the peace of the Lord remain within us, our families and communities and bring us the joy and happiness in the year to come. The divine name appears in the Blessing, giving them life and warmth. The graciousness of God may remain with each one of us throughout the New Year.

A saint asked his disciples, 'Why do we shout in anger? Why do people shout at each other when they are set?' Disciples thought for a while, one of them said, 'because we lose our calm, we shout for that.' "But, why to shout when the other person is just next to you?' asked the saint. 'Isn't it possible to speak to him or her with a soft voice? Why do you shout at a person when you're angry?' Disciples gave some other answers but none satisfied the saint. Finally he explained, 'When two people are angry at each other, their hearts distance a lot. To cover that distance they must shout to be able to hear each other. The angrier they are, the stronger they will have to shout to hear each other through that great distance.' Then the saint asked, 'What happens when two people fall in love? They don't shout at each other but talk softly, why? Because their hearts are said to be very close to each other. The distance between them is very small...' The saint continued, 'When they love each other even more, what happens? They do not speak, only whisper and they get even closer to each other in their love. Finally they

even need not whisper, they only look at each other and that's all. That is how close two people are when they love each other.'

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