

## **Mary, Mother of God January 1, 2018**

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

The life of Jesus begins with Mary. Therefore, it is appropriate that we begin the New Year with a Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. This celebration echoes that the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the Mother of God, is also our Heavenly Mother. Since Mary is the Mother of God she is the mother of joy, joy to the world. Mary became Mother of the Church through her total adherence to God's will in her life. So the traditional greeting on this first day of the New Year is one of joy: Happy New Year. We pray that the Lord Jesus will fill our lives during the coming year with an abundance of blessings that will enrich our spiritual lives so that we may continue to be his shining lights in the world. Mary is a mother to all of us and her motherhood extends to all of us when Jesus on the cross offered the disciple to Mary, he offered the whole humanity to her. It's significant that the most venerated human person by the Church is a mother. Mothers participate with God in an exceptional way to raise up new life. A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Today is a good day to remember our own mothers, living and deceased, and to implore the Blessed Virgin's intercession for them. 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, giving them peace and security. In the second reading Paul reminds us that God's Son has become one of us through Mary. Through him we have become the children 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 the church affirms the doctrine that Mary is the Mother of God. This Catholic Dogma finds its origin from the passage found in the Gospel of Luke. After the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Upon her arrival, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit expressed her joy at the arrival of the Mother of God. In 431 A.D, the Council of Ephesus affirmed that Mary was truly the Mother of God because "according to the flesh" she gave birth to Jesus, who was truly God from the first moment of His conception. Twenty years later the Council of Chalcedon affirmed that the Motherhood of Mary was a truthful dogma and an official doctrine of the Holy Catholic Church. Her Motherhood began when the eternal God entered human history. The second Divine person of the Trinity, the Word, took on a human nature in the womb of Mary. Secondly, 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. Thirdly, the church celebrates this day as the world day of peace and invites us specially to pray for peace in the world. This is also for us the New Year day as we look with hope into a future year of grace while we thank God for the many blessings received in the past year. On this first day of the New Year we ask for grace to know Jesus more intimately, love him more ardently and follow him more closely so that this may be a truly Happy New Year.

In the First Reading from the Book of Numbers we heard of the Lord's blessing upon the Israelites. The Lord God was preparing the people of Israel for the journey toward the Promised Land. God had given them every advantage to make the journey to Canaan without any mishap. Occupying the central place throughout their journey was the Ark of the Covenant. Now Israel belonged to God through the covenant on Sinai. They were 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.' Their special bond with God was evident in the words of the blessing. God's benevolence was a light shining on them like the sun to nourish them and guide their way. God's peace would protect them from all harm. He will be with them always and will bless them. Included in these benefits were divine protection, countless gifts and lasting peace. He will be faithful to them through his covenant made at Sinai.

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 the Galatians that Jesus coming under the natural law has transformed us making us the children of God. Therefore as Christians we are no longer slaves and servants but heirs as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus. As Paul says, with Jesus the Son, we now can freely 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 be close to God and 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. In today's feast we remember that it is Mary who played a crucial role in the

bridging of the gap between God and humankind. Therefore a Paul advice 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 that has found hospitality and shelter in a facility shared with farm animals. We see a man, a woman who has just given birth, and baby Jesus lying in the manger. Truly primitive surroundings and yet this little child 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, persons of low economic status, the discard of the community. 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 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 this Gospel scene is the one that is most striking, filled with total simplicity. They find in the little family the ordinary simple people. Once they encounter the child Jesus they come close and worship him. Luke tells us that 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. For Mary the meaning of this event will only unfold over time. This is not a matter of the intellect but of the heart and pondering is a fitting process. The message is too big and the event is too powerful and 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.

The shepherds went back to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. They also told everyone around of what they had seen: the shepherds were the very first heralds of the Good News, the Gospel message. They were the first missionaries who proclaim the word of God. A strange choice is made by God with the ordinary persons, regarded as outcasts and not surely social companions. They had the joy of contacting their Lord, knowing Jesus, and by its very nature, had to be shared and communicated with others. The shepherds may not have understood a great deal of this mystery. Certainly they could not understand Mary as the Mother of Jesus is also the Mother of that Person who is God, one with Father and

Holy Spirit. Clearly we too are not expected to be able to understand or explain this any further. The nature of God is quite beyond us. The shepherds accepted this in their simplicity and faith. We need the simple and trusting faith of the shepherds. Luke tells us that all who heard what the shepherds had to say were amazed because nothing about the message made sense. They were providing with something unheard of. But they gave a message of something new and wonderful making people wonder about their words. The extraordinary has occurred in and through the ordinary.

Luke tells us that Mary ponders, considers and gives careful thought to the message of the shepherds. The implication is that Mary does not know what the message of the shepherd means at the moment. But later as the divine things unfold, the things will be clear to her. The clarity will result from the pondering and considering the mystery over a long period of time. In a way this is Mary's greatest gift and sets the stage for why in the gospel tradition she is understood as the preeminent model for Christian discipleship. No sooner has this extraordinary event taken place than things move quickly to the ordinary. The shepherds return to their fields and the family has the newborn child circumcised and names him just as every other pious Jewish family would do, a name chosen by God. Nevertheless nothing will ever be same again. Mary is well aware of this. At this point she does not know the full meaning of this event. For her it is a time for pondering and not for drawing quick conclusions. 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.

The Nativity scene attracts humble shepherds, a reminder that the rich and mighty hold no special favor in God's eyes when it comes to the spiritual realm. Likewise we can't forget the humble and needy among us. The Christmas season reminds us that Our Lord lives in the humblest of places even today: in the poor, in the forgotten, in the abandoned. A complete Christian life includes besides our beliefs, the works of charity. The Gospel speaks of the earthy reality of Jesus and his mother. The shepherds in great excitement after hearing the message of the angel and the sudden outbreak of the first "Gloria" being sung want to discover the new part of history. Perhaps what they discovered must have seemed an anti-climax: an ordinary baby being born in a manger and we are told that they were amazed. No words of Mary or Joseph are recorded although they must have shared something with their visitors. In all of this time Mary must have been trying to understand what was really going on. One imagines at this stage that if she had been greeted as "Mother of God" she would have been both alarmed and surprised, even shocked. So

the Gospel says that during all this time Mary treasured all these words and experiences and perhaps a hint that Mary had shared these reflections later with the writer of the gospel.

In recent years, the first day of the New Year, has been designated World Day of Peace. It is very appropriate because today's gospel story presents us with a total invitation to a world of 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 author of peace. On this day, the Pope asks all of us to pray for peace and to work for peace. The message for this year tells us that in building a world of peace and justice, the Catholic Church must listen to the ideas and hopes of young people and offer them educational opportunities that will strengthen their ability to work for the common good. As part of the church's efforts, Pope Benedict XVI has chosen "Educating young people in justice and peace" to be the theme for this year's World Peace Day. In his message the Pope wants to highlight an urgent need in the world today: to listen to and enhance the important role of new generations in the realization of the common good, and in the affirmation of a just and peaceful social order where fundamental human rights can be fully expressed and realized. The duty to prepare future generations also includes a government obligation to ensure that young people have appropriate opportunities for personal growth, particularly through education and employment. The Church welcomes young people and sees them as the sign of an ever promising springtime, and holds out Jesus to them as the model of love that "makes all things new." The Pontiff invites the young people to labor for justice and peace in a complex and globalized world, so preparing them for the future and this will require a real alliance among all those responsible for educating and forming the world's future leaders.

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.

According to legend, a young man while roaming the desert came across a spring of delicious crystal-clear water. The water was so sweet he filled his leather canteen so he could bring some back to a tribal elder who had been his

teacher. After a four-day journey he presented the water to the old man who took a deep drink, smiled warmly and thanked his student lavishly for the sweet water. The young man returned to his village with a happy heart. Later, the teacher let another student taste the water. He spat it out, saying it was awful. It apparently had become stale because of the old leather container. The student challenged his teacher: "Master, the water was foul. Why did you pretend to like it?" The teacher replied, "You only tasted the water. I tasted the gift. The water was simply the container for an act of loving-kindness and nothing could be sweeter." I think we understand this lesson best when we receive innocent gifts of love from young children. Whether it's a ceramic tray or a macaroni bracelet, the natural and proper response is appreciation and expressed thankfulness because we love the idea within the gift.

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