

Readings for the Feast of Mary the Mother of God

FIRST READING: Numbers 6:22-27

A reading from the Book of Numbers:

The LORD said to Moses: "Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them: This is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them: The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace! So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8.

May God bless us in his mercy.

May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us. So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation.

May God bless us in his mercy.

May the nations be glad and exult because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on the earth you guide.

May God bless us in his mercy.

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you! May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

May God bless us in his mercy.

SECOND READING: Galatians 4:4-7

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians:

Brothers and sisters: When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. As proof that you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 2:16-21

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Feast of Mary the Mother of God

Today is the one feast that is both religious and secular. This is the Octave of Christmas and the feast of Mary, the Mother of God. It is also New Year's Day, the beginning of our calendar year. Our year begins, in the Northern Hemisphere, as the days lengthen. In the Southern Hemisphere, the year begins as nights lengthen. We approach spring as they approach autumn. An octave is a bit foreign to us. It comes from the ancient Jewish Tradition that is our Christian roots. A feast was not a one day affair that was over and done, but an eight day celebration. For the eight days from December 25, through January 1, we celebrate Christmas Day. Even though the Valentine's Day decorations will appear in stores soon, today is still Christmas Day.

As a kid, January 1, was always the Octave of Christmas. As being still Christmas Day, we can still wish people a blessed Christmas. We can also add a blessed New Year. Because our modern sense of time is more compartmentalized, the Octave has become other feasts. It has also been the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Jesus was born under Mosaic Law and was subject to it. For a while it was the World Day of Peace as proclaimed by Pope Paul VI. It has finally become the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. It is still a feast day and Holy Day of Obligation because it is still Christmas Day.

Mary's motherhood needs no explanation. All of us have or have had a mother. We all know women who are mothers. Women with children are mothers. We can all understand this feast from the perspective of our own human experience. I don't have to spend much time explaining this first of the Marian Doctrines. This

is the only Marian feast where I don't have to teach. Instead I will focus on the scriptures for today.

"May the Lord bless and keep you..." This is the beginning of Aaron's blessing of the Israelite people. Most of us have heard the basic form of the Aaronic blessing. God told Moses to bless the Israelites with these words. It is an invocation of the name of God. Jews do not speak aloud God's name. They consider it so holy that it cannot be spoken aloud. The Second Commandment tells people not to take the name of the Lord in vain. Jewish Tradition takes these words literally. In place of the name "God," "YHWH," or Yahweh, people say "Ha shem" which means simply, "The Name." In Jewish writings God is often spelled "G*d." I have always found that custom a bit ironic because that's also the way we can write nasty words.

What's an invocation? The word itself means "in voice." An invocation is always spoken out loud. It can be a prayer, spoken aloud to God. It can be a blessing spoken over food, people or place. It can also be the name of God spoken aloud. God dwells within and among us. When ever we make an invocation, God is the source of what we say. We offer prayer to God because God has prayed within us. Being aware of God's presence, the effects of a blessing comes out of God's indwelling. Aaron's prayer prays for God's blessing and praying it reveals its source, God. Prayer is really God's action within and through us. Praying blesses the one who prays. Often we can say, "God help me!" This is one of the most powerful prayers we can pray and shows that God's help has already begun.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the message of the gospel of John on Christmas Day. In Galatians, Paul has explained the meaning. Jesus was born a human being in all but sin. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He was therefore born under the Law. The salvation Jesus won was for others under the Law. For Paul the Law of Moses was the source of sin for no one could completely follow the Law. Jesus came to save all sinners. He was sinless himself but took on all the sins of the human race and died for them. He was the sacrifice offered to God for that purpose. Only God can forgive sin. All of Mosaic Law had an underlying principle. What is the source of the Law? God. Who is God? God is Love. God's love is eternal, infinite and unconditional. Too often we only hear, "Thou shalt not..." The source of the Law is love. Without God's love the Law is empty.

The one human race was created in God's image and likeness. Because of that, God is our Father. God sent Jesus, his son, to be born one like us. Because of Jesus' humanity, he is our brother. Through Jesus we became heirs of God. What

do we inherit as heirs? We inherit eternal life and the Kingdom of God. How do we know this? The spirit brings forth from us the invocation of God's name, Father. The name Abba is not just the name of a defunct rock band but is the Hebrew word for daddy or papa. God is intimate with and to us in a personal way. We are no longer slaves who fear sin, punishment and death but are heirs to the life of God.

Today's gospel is out of context. It told us that the shepherds had a message to tell. It didn't tell the message's origin or content. Earlier the angel of the Lord appeared and announced to them, "Do not fear. I proclaim to you Good News. The Messiah, Savior and Son of God was born in Bethlehem. Here is the sign that this has happened: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." They searched and found exactly that. To the people of Bethlehem they gave witness to what they heard and then saw. Those who heard the shepherds' message went and did the same too. The Word spread through the words of these witnesses. The age of the Messiah had begun. Those who heard the message became witnesses, sharing what they had heard and seen. Their lives changed. We have all heard this message too. How has it changed us?

Mary treasured these things and in her heart reflected upon their meaning. To ask how the gospel has changed us begins with a simple question. Don't we reflect on the events we remember? Don't we seek meaning and significance in our memories? We can treasure our past too. We seek the patterns and presence of God in our lives. We can see that our failures and mistakes may have been the means through which God has directed our lives. Through our pain and misfortune and through our delight and triumph, God has led us to this day. God has shaped us into the persons we are now.

It's always easy to place these Godly figures of Joseph, Mary and Jesus as people so remote and different from us. The message of the Scriptures is that they are like us. God became one of us. This was part of the shepherds message each generation heard, learned, lived and then passed on to us. As Mary discovered God's hand on her through her reflection, so do we. As the shepherds returned to their flocks and work, so do we, with the message, "God is with us."

Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision is not a pleasant experience; it hurts. Jesus, the Son of God, was born in a barn and had an animal food trough as a crib. Jesus knew inconvenience and pain from infancy as we did. Although Jesus is God, his inauspicious beginnings show kinship with us. Jesus' origin story prepared him for his greatest indignity and suffering. Jesus was

tortured and executed as a criminal. God could save us in no other way; the Way of the Cross. Today, Jesus accompanies us on our way.

I like to look at these stories without the special effects. I like to note the similarities to the sour notes in my life. In this way I seek God in the ordinary events of my day. God is never far off in heaven or busy with other things. God has lived a life like ours. God never leaves his beloved children and Jesus walks with all his sisters and brothers through life. I even smile when I envision Mary, Joseph and the infant lying in the manger. It must have been a bit crowded.

May we be patient at the coming of the New Year. May we find strength to face what will come knowing God's presence.

James D. Beath
January 1, 2021