

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Romans 8:28-30 / Matthew 1:1-16.18-23)
08.09.2018

The first reading proposed for this feast is an extract from Paul's Letter to the Romans, a text which makes this affirmation with which we are all familiar: *We know that by turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those He has called according to His purpose.* Frequently we hear those words rhymed off. People have recourse to them when they want to inject some little glimmer of hope into a darkened situation. Maybe we repeat them to ourselves when our own lot is proving to be challenging. It is easier to let the apostle's words fall from our lips than it is to believe them in our hearts. There are many things which happen in life – in our own lives and in those of people dear to us – which we find difficult to accept. There is much we experience which is really hard; many situations in which we struggle to see God's hand at work. And yet Paul affirms: *in all things God is at work for our good.* The implication of this statement is that even in the forlorn, apparently God-forsaken, moments of our lives, the Lord is there. He is with us and He is at work. Even in the least evident of situations, with a heart of faith, we are called to believe that God is working out His purpose – albeit in some mysterious way. Just think of the cross. Here we have the supreme example of what I am referring to. In that seemingly God-forsaken moment – when deep darkness covered all things – our redemption was being accomplished. God was working out His purpose!

It is from the perspective given to us by the apostle Paul in the extract from Romans which we heard in today's first reading that I want to reflect with you upon the mystery of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary was so important to the way in which God worked out His purpose for our salvation and that of all the world. Invited to celebrate her birthday, I hear the call addressed to us to be an invitation to think in terms of a new beginning for each one of our lives and for that of the whole Church of God. Is it not true to say that to some extent every birthday celebration is an opportunity for those concerned to think in terms of a fresh start, a new beginning to life? Since Mary is hailed as both a *Model for all Christian disciples* and the *Mother of the Church*, the celebration of the Blessed Virgin's Birthday as an opportunity for us as individual persons, as a community of believers, as Church, to hear God's call to set out on a fresh start with the Christ to whom Mary was chosen by God to give birth.

If ever there was a moment in time when God's People needed to hear a call to new life it is at this juncture in the Church's history. I say *junction*, but I could just as well have said *junction*, for we are well and truly at a point when we have to take a turn and make a choice to walk in the right direction. Yes, we are at a turning point in the Church's history. We cannot afford to get things wrong right now. Among the roads open before us, we have to discern which one to take; among the various ways we could follow, we have to engage ourselves to walk along the right path

Jesus, the Son of God born of Mary, spoke of Himself as *the Way*: His is the road we ought to follow. He is the One who first came into the world to walk with us. He walks with us especially at times of trial, in moments of crisis and apparent hopelessness.

Having already invited you to think of the cross, I now invite you to think of the Emmaus gospel scene. Therein we see how the Risen Jesus was recognised to be *the way* at a moment when the disciples were heading in the wrong direction – that road leading away from the Church which was gathered in Jerusalem. The encounter of the Emmaus pilgrims with the

Risen Lord led them to make an about turn; it led them to want to reconnect with the community from whom they were distancing themselves as they headed out of the city.

If to celebrate Mary's birthday is to recall her beginning, it is also to remember our beginning as Church. It is to return to Jerusalem where the Church first came to birth. I believe we are called not only *to recall* the Church's first birth in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but *to live* a new birth at this moment in time, wherever we are. The call addressed to us is to experience a fresh Pentecost within the Church – *the new Jerusalem* – today.

When Mary found herself faced with the impossibilities which surrounded her and aware of her own inadequacy at the Annunciation, she asked how the things the Lord promised to her and awaited from her could ever come about. She was told: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you!* That effusion of the Spirit accorded to Mary prefigured the Pentecost event which gave birth to the Church. At the first Pentecost, the moment which brought the Church to birth, Mary was present. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the disciples *were gathered in prayer with Mary the Mother of Jesus*. At this time, as Church, we need to engage ourselves seriously in prayer. It is good for us to know that just like the first disciples (the nucleus of the Church) we too have the prayer support of Mary the Mother of Jesus by our side. In the days of her earthly life, Mary was a woman of confidence and trust, one fervent in the Spirit. As such, she served the Lord as a model disciple who stood firm in faith, joyful in hope and expectation, strong in trial, persevering in prayer. Still today Mary the Mother of Jesus prays with us. The same Spirit that was given to Mary and to the early believers is given to us. This Spirit is the sign that God is with us. It is the assurance that we are not left alone to work out our problems. The indwelling of God's Spirit has a renewing and re-birthing effect upon us. The Holy Spirit, which is God's love active within our hearts, can *work everything together for our good*, using even our pain and our defects, our mistakes and our errors along the way; transforming and re-creating us through all these things.

Our Benedictine Congregation of St Mary of Monte Oliveto observes today's celebration as its patronal feast. As a monastic family we prepare to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation's Archabbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming *Jubilee Year 2019* be lived by all our Olivetan monasteries in a way which will see each of our communities graced with the blessing of a new birth in Christ and a renewed sense of our particular calling. For us at Rostrevor, may the coming Jubilee Year hold God's choicest blessings in store – among them the arrival of new members. May it see us affirmed and confirmed in our particular vocation, which is to contribute to the growth in unity of all God's People.

If the Church is called to rebirth (and I believe that most certainly is the case at this critical time in its life), even more than that, it is the whole of this world which needs to be recreated. The hastening of the initiation of the renewal for which we long depends upon each one of us saying a renewed *yes* to God's life within us; it depends upon each one of us echoing that *fiat* spoken by Mary at the Annunciation, which was nothing other than an echo of the eternal *yes* of Christ: *Christ came into the world saying 'yes', behold I come to do Your will*.

God works everything together for our good. How true that is! However, we must remember, that it is also true that, in His great humility, the Lord awaits our collaboration to bring about the good He wills for the world. The Lord found a spirit of collaboration in His servant Mary. This idea is captured for us in the Catechism of the Catholic Church wherein we read: *By*

pronouncing her 'fiat' at the Annunciation and giving her consent to the Incarnation, Mary was already collaborating with the whole work her Son was to accomplish.

I believe that Mary of Nazareth teaches us how to truly live our lives in a real world. She truly lived her life in the real world – with all the trials inherent to that – saying yes to the One who called her from before time began to be the Mother of His Son. Mary said *yes* to the One who created the world and is forever recreating it through His Son. She said *yes* to the One who came into this world to offer it redemption when, in response to the angel's message to her, she offered her *fiat* to Jesus' conception in her womb. Mary said *yes* as she stood by the foot of the cross – just as she had done all along Jesus' life journey – including at those times when she simply could not understand God's ways for Her Son. She said *yes* to the gift of the Spirit which brought the Church into being – that same Spirit which is forever animating the life of *God's Holy Faithful People*. May her example help us to echo her *yes* and renew our own *yes* to God today and every day.

Amen!