

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
(Numbers 6:22-27 / Luke 2:16-21)
01.01.2017

The words of blessing from the Book of Numbers heard in our first reading launch us into the New Year. This prayer of benediction, first spoken by Aaron, reflects the Lord's desire for each one of us and for all His people. Our loving God longs to see us welcome His graciousness; He wants that we allow the light of His face to shine upon us; His desire is that we may know His peace.

Since it is never the Lord's way to impose anything upon us – not even what is good for us – it befalls us to open our hearts to welcome what He offers. We are free either to accept God's gifts or to refuse them.

The gospels draw our attention to the fact that among those to whom the Father sent His Son, to bestow blessings upon them, there were many who refused the gift of life in abundance that Christ came to bring. In the Prologue of John's gospel we read: *The Word (...) the true light that enlightens all people was in the world. He came to His own domain and His own people did not accept Him.*

Those words are a warning to us. The sad reality is that we can fail to receive the gifts the Lord wants to offer us; we can refuse the Lord's graciousness; we can turn down the gifts of light and peace He wants to see us enjoy. We do this when we fail to recognise and appreciate that Christ is by our side.

How easily we forget that the Lord of heaven and earth has chosen to make His home in our hearts! Does it not happen that we fail to acknowledge that God is at work in our lives in so many ways – and not least through the people He sends our way to reveal His love to us?

We can be so inattentive to the Father's merciful love and His generous goodness which is manifested to us in all those who reflect His kindness and compassion to us. We can be indifferent to the gentleness of our brother Jesus in those who are truly caring in our regard. We can be blind to the radiance of the Holy Spirit shining through those who show us love. There are people who are nothing less than beacons of God's own light for us as we journey through life's way – men and women who help us make our way through the dark passages, valleys of shadow and perilous ravines of our lives – and yet we fail to recognise the sign of the Lord's blessing they are. We can be oblivious to the consideration of those who grace our lives with their generosity. What terrible inattention to the Lord! What negligence on our behalf when we are amiss to recognise the multiple manners by which His goodness is shown to us through other people! So often we fail to appreciate and reflect upon the graces that are bestowed upon us.

Today's gospel tells us that during the first Christmas night *Mary treasured and pondered in her heart all things concerning Jesus.* Clearly, Mary savoured and marvelled at the good things that befell her. She lived in an awareness of the Lord's blessings in her life. We are told that *Mary pondered and treasured these things in her heart* precisely in difficult circumstances. Think of the context in which Joseph and herself found themselves on that first Christmas night. This couple were in a precarious and vulnerable position, far from the security of their own home. By her attitude of mind and heart that night, the Virgin Mother models a precious lesson for all of us. Mary illustrates something we would do well to take on board and remember for the more challenging days (and even more for the dark night passages) of the year ahead: the importance of savouring what is good in our lives, recognising the graces that are there, acknowledging the God-given gifts which are also part of all our daily experience, even in the midst of woe.

We are not always attentive to and thankful for the Lord's goodness to us. We can be more inclined to focus on what is less positive in our experience. We can ignore or discount our blessings. How readily we turn all our attention to the ills that betide us, fixating on the trials that come our way. When we get caught into the negative, this only serves only to weaken us; it detracts from our well-being.

Let's face it, we do ourselves much harm at times by holding on to our painful thoughts, by nourishing sentiments of shame associated with the failures of our guilt-ridden past, by dwelling on and brooding over the hurts endured, by clinging to, the wrongs that were inflicted upon us, or allowing to cling to us the harm we have caused to others – for, who among us has not done wrong to others, or at least thought ill of them?

What good does it do any of us to make pain endure longer than is necessary? None whatsoever! To hold on to hurt serves only to damage us further. It is a form of self-harm.

At the beginning of this New Year it is good for us to be reminded that we should be vigilant not to allow sombre ideas to invade and take hold of our hearts. I hear a call addressed to us today to be on our guard against that great temptation which is to let our inner darkness to speak to us; to allow all that is less than good to so intrude and disrupt our lives that we are put off-course. Reflect for a moment. Is it not true that the many negative thoughts we retain as they traverse our spirits only contribute to making us feel depressed, embittered, resentful and eaten up by anger? Understand me. I am not saying that darker issues are not part of our existence. We cannot ignore the fact that our lives are sometimes overshadowed by ill-feeling. In this fallen, broken world suffering is part of every human life; it will be part of our experience. It is evident that there will be times when not everything around us, nor everything within us, will be all sweetness and light. Frequently, there is bitter sorrow in our lives; we can be shrouded in darkness. Sometimes our lives can be so overcast that even the day can appear to be as dark as the night. It happens that we find ourselves so greatly distressed that we feel overcome – completely submerged – at certain moments. There is no point in denying this. What we must remember at such challenging times is that Jesus has gone through all this before us. He goes through life's dark passages with us. Christ is still with us when we are led to traverse distressing moments in our lives.

Jesus shows us the way through when all is pitched against us. You will remember how we are told in the Passion narrative that *between the sixth and ninth hour – in what should have been full daylight – a deep darkness covered the whole earth*. It is significant that it is precisely during this time that Jesus is shown to have intoned a wonderful psalm of blessing, psalm 22. This prayer of praise which does not deny feelings of abandonment nonetheless dares to sing of God's faithfulness, recognising Him to be the source of all blessing. The psalm acclaims the Lord as the One *enthroned upon the praises of Israel*.

In our hours of great trial, if only we would voice a prayer of praise – as Jesus did! This would surely strengthen us.

While it is to be hoped that the coming year will contain many blessings for all of us, I expect it will also present each one of us with a fair amount of challenge. Every year does. Life is never an easy ride all of the time. Thank God, there are moments when all flows easily, but how quickly things can turn around for us – a tragedy can strike us, an unexpected affliction can come our way. Last Sunday one man known to us sat in this church celebrating the Christmas Day Eucharist with our community, joining in and rejoicing with us in our thanksgiving. Little did he think then that he would be sitting in Intensive Care in the Royal Victoria Hospital each day of the past week, keeping vigil near to his son who has been battling for his life as the result of a *hit and run* accident.

I cannot help but think of how I spoke piously on the day after Christmas of the cross being

planted near to the crib. It is one thing to talk in this way, it is another thing to have to live through the mystery of suffering when the cross comes our way.

I am pretty confident that if we were to think back over the past year we would see how it contained for all of us not only blessings, but also challenges. Some of us may have been called upon to carry very heavy crosses in the course of the past year. I believe it is vital as we look back – not only over last year, but the whole of our past life – that we recognise how the Lord was always there for us. In and through everything – even the most terrible events – the Lord will have managed to find ways to bless us. Yes, I believe it is vital – literally life-giving – for us to acknowledge how God was and always is there for us, ever ready to offer us His comfort in our afflictions, prompt to give us His strength in our weakness.

Thanksgiving for God's blessings which were bestowed upon us in the past gives us courage for the present and hope for the future. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, knew this. It was the surely Mary's memory of God's blessings bestowed upon her in the past and her thanksgiving for the many signs of His on-going favour in her life that gave her the courage she needed to live through those dark hours she shared with her Son as He lived His passion on Calvary's Hill. The fact that *Mary pondered and treasured in her heart the good things concerning Jesus*, savouring and delighting in them, gave her the force she needed to stand firm when the time came for her heart to be pierced – as Simeon had foretold it would be.

The call addressed to each one of us this morning is a call to allow the Lord's blessing to enter into our lives to the point where we become a blessing for others in our turn. We are blessed to bless. We are saved to announce the gospel of salvation to others. We are healed to bring healing into this wounded world.

I hear the apostle's words resonate in my heart and share them with you not only as a reassurance, but also as an exhortation for the beginning of this New Year: *The Lord comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

As we bless the Lord on this day, and allow ourselves to be blessed by Him, so may we become a source of blessing for all around us in the come which opens up before us.

Amen!