

Mary, Mother of God
(Numbers 6:22-27 / Luke 2:16-21)
01.01.2019

Today we celebrate Mary, the Mother of Jesus – Mary, called *Theotokos, Mother of God*.

Mary was given to us by Christ, from the cross, to be our mother also.

I believe we are invited to hear those words spoken by Jesus to the *beloved disciple* on Calvary's Hill as a message for us today: *Behold your Mother*.

So, let us look to Mary. Let us try to see what is revealed to us by this woman who is offered to us as a gift by Jesus Himself. As we do so, we recall how Christ also confided a special guardianship role to Mary. Not only did Jesus say to John, *Behold your mother*, He also said to Mary, *Behold your son*.

Mary's motherhood extends to all of us who are members of the Church, *the community of the beloved disciple*. Indeed, we could say that Mary's motherhood extends to the whole human family, for, in line with the Church's ancient tradition, we hail her as the *New Eve: the new mother of all the living*

I said we would do well to look to Mary to see what is revealed to us by this woman.

When we do that, what we see is that Mary always did what the Lord asked of her.

Mary's original *fiat*, pronounced at the Annunciation, was echoed throughout her life. We can understand therefore that Mary not only took to heart what Jesus said to her on Calvary's Hill in regard to John, but, carries that mission over into eternity. Mary she still holds Jesus' message in her heart, fulfilling it in our respect today. She regards us as her children; she watches over us as our mother.

Just as Mary held all things concerning Jesus in her heart, so she holds upon her heart all things concerning us. In the same way as *Mary treasured in the very depths of her being all things about Jesus*, so she does likewise when it comes to us.

The gospels show us how Mary communed with Jesus in everything He lived from Bethlehem to Golgotha – and even beyond that into the early days of the Church. Having waited in prayer in the Upper Room with the disciples for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, leading on from the Pentecost event, in which she participated, we can take it that Mary journeyed with the Church – especially within the community of *the beloved disciple* since John would have taken her home as his mother.

The gospels also show us that Mary was there for her Son even when she didn't fully understand His actions and what His Father was asking Him to do.

In the same way, Mary is close to us in all the ups and downs of our lives; she is with us in our joys and sorrows. This is hardly surprising since she is a mother. Mothers who have physically carried their children in the womb for some nine months continue to carry them with a particular spiritual bond for the whole of their lifetime.

I often think of what one Dominican friar said to me some forty years ago. At a time when many of his contemporaries were no longer wearing rosary beads attached to their habits this Religious explained to me that he continued to wear rosary beads on his belt out of the conviction that even if he was not always thinking of Mary – admitting to me that he rarely prayed the rosary – he was nonetheless convinced that Mary, like any good mother, was always be thinking of him and would do so until the end. Many years later I heard this same friar preach and in his preaching he made the remark that among the last prayers many of us will hear here on earth, just before our passing into eternity, will be the *Hail Mary*. He is probably right to suggest that many of us will hear Holy Mary, the Mother of God, being invoked by those gathered around our deathbed; we will hear Mary being asked to pray for us poor sinners then – at the hour of our death – and to the plea of those supporting us in prayer we will most likely murmur a gentle *amen*.

Saying all that, words of the late Pope, St John-Paul II, come to mind: *The Mother of God and of human beings keeps in her heart all humanity's problems, great and difficult, and continues to*

meditate upon them. He went on to say: *The Alma Redemptoris Mater walks with us and guides us with motherly tenderness towards the future. Thus she helps humanity cross the thresholds of the years, centuries and millennia by sustaining their hope in the One who is the Lord of history.*

These words lead me to affirm that it is surely good for all of us to be reminded of Mary's maternal presence at the threshold of this new year. I dare to believe that, in the communion of saints, Mary is with us as we head into 2019 – with none of us quite knowing just what this year will hold in store for us. I hear a call addressed to us this morning to trust in Mary's maternal concern and to believe in her prayer with and for us as we head into the unknown.

It strikes me that just as every mother has for mission to remind her child of his or her essential identity, so Mary reminds us, her children, of our identity: she reminds us just who and what we are... essentially. Mary reminds us that *we belong to God*, that we are His children, that we are *the Father's beloved*, members of a People whom God has chosen as His very own.

We heard reference to Jesus' Jewish identity in the gospel account read this morning: *When the eighth came and the child was to be circumcised they gave Him the name Jesus.*

We can take it that Mary would have drawn to her Son's special attention His identity as a member of the Jewish People, the race into which He was born. Moreover, albeit discreetly – wanting to respect her Son's own free will – Mary would have found ways of letting her Son know that He had a special mission from God. Calling Him by the name *Jesus* – the name she was told by the angel to give to Him at His birth – Mary would have spoken to the boy of God's already once accomplished and now promised anew gift of salvation for all His People.

We can take it that Mary – like every good Jewish parent – would have inculcated in the child Jesus the desire to see *God's Holy People* set free from all that held them bound and refrained them from serving the Lord *in holiness and justice*.

Mary would have helped the boy Jesus understand His identity as part of *God's Chosen race*; she would have constantly reminded Him of His own belovedness.

Mary would have helped her Son appreciate the true meaning of the mark He carried in His flesh; she would have told Him what it signified; she would have explained to the boy Jesus that His circumcision was a visible sign of God's Covenant love for all His People. Mary would have helped the boy Jesus to understand God's Covenant love in His own life to begin with.

This liturgical celebration used to be called the *Feast of the Circumcision*. Although the primary title of the liturgical festival has changed, we do not forget the mystery of the circumcision, with all its significance. Jesus' circumcision was for Him as for every Hebrew a reminder in the flesh of His identity. A Hebrew male would have said to Himself – and a Hebrew female would also have been reminded of this in every intimate encounter with her husband: *I am a Hebrew. We belong to God's Chosen People. I am/we are dedicated to God.*

Before all else – including before it was a sign of ethnic identity – circumcision was the sign of God's Covenant with Israel.

Even though, already in New Testament times, physical circumcision was no longer esteemed to be a requirement of Christians who came from a gentile background, how important it is that we do not forget that we part of God's Covenant People! We are all of us part of what St Paul calls *the New Israel of God*... In the words of Pope Pius XII, we are, all of us, *spiritual Semites*.

Drawing to her Son's attention that He was part of God's Chosen Covenant People, Mary would have spoken to Jesus of Israel as *the Lord's Servant*. She would have reminded Him of the phrase found more than once in the Hebrew Bible: *You are my servant, Israel*.

By her own example, Mary modelled servant-hood for Jesus. Her first word to the angel Gabriel was: *I am the Lord's servant, His handmaid. I am ready to do God's will. Let what you have said be done to me*. Those words engaged Mary to live a really radical change in her life – a change beyond all her imagining! The whole course of Mary's life would be turned around because of her *fiat*.

What an example of servant-hood she gives us when she says simply: *I am the Lord's handmaid!* If Mary's humble, trusting acceptance of God's will led to a complete *about turn* in her life, she simply submitted to this; she just *went with it*, we could say. Mary yielded her dreams, her plans, even her body to the Lord. The dreams of the young girl of Nazareth were shattered and her plans overturned, as she was called to give her all to the One who called her to bear His Son by a Virgin birth and thus to permit the Christ-child's entry into our world.

I cannot emphasise enough how Mary's entire existence was upended by her consent to the Lord's will. If her call entailed a certain honour – after all, she was greeted as *highly favoured by the Lord*; it also entailed real suffering – she was told by Simeon that *a sword would pierce here own heart...* and it did!

In all this Mary encourages us as members of a servant Church to surrender our personal life and our communal life to the Lord.

Mary shows us that the strength we need to do this is to be found not within ourselves, but in the Lord who calls upon us to surrender our lives to His holy will.

An assurance first given to Mary is also given to us today: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you*. The Spirit is there to give us strength in our weakness, reassurance in our questionings, confidence amidst our doubts, and even a certain spiritual audacity. The Spirit is there to give us supernatural courage to balance our natural timidity; he is there to help dispel our fears and overcome our trepidation.

That being said, it is not because the Spirit is given to us and not because we dare to believe that God is at work in our favour, that we won't, at the same time, be left feeling acutely aware of our limitations, on occasion. We may even be rendered painfully conscious of our deficiencies at times. It is not because the Lord has chosen to act in and through us that we won't be troubled and not because we are His servants that we won't suffer. We can be under great pressure and strain even as we do what the Lord bids us do.

Our response to the Lord's calling won't always be easy for us. Indeed, the Scriptures point to the opposite as more than likely. Isaiah speaks of the Lord's servant being *destined to suffer*. Jesus said the same of Himself: *the Son of Man is destined to suffer*. Clearly, *servant-hearted-ness* is not without its challenges; it often leads the *servant-hearted* person to make very great sacrifices... including the ultimate sacrifice of their life.

It is vital for us to grasp that the title by which we address Mary, *Theotokos*, is a title given to her to make a Christological statement. What is being underlined for us by this appellation is that the child born of Mary is *true God and true man: true God*, so Mary, mother of Jesus, is *Theotokos: Mother of God!*

If Mary reveals to us who and what Christ's essential identity is, at the same time, she reveals to us – as Church and as individual Christians – what our identity is: we are God's servants, His servant children. The mother of Jesus is our mother.

When Mary declared *I am the Lord's servant* she said all that could be said about herself. By those words, paradoxically, she declared her greatest *honour* – and by extension ours.

There was and is no greater honour for Mary for all eternity, or for any other human being than simply to be *a servant of the True King*. (This is what Benedict calls us monks to be in the Prologue of his *Rule for Monks*.)

Called to see and to take Mary as model, we should understand our vocation as being to live as part of the *Servant People of God*. To that end the Church invites us to take Mary as an exemplar for our Christian living. Each one of us should see our self as called to be, as Mary was, *a humble servant of the Lord*, called to do as she did: *whatever the Lord bids us*.

May we enter into this new year of grace, 2019, in that spirit.

Like Mary, may we all be *full of grace* – filled with grace – at the threshold of this new year and at every step along its way.

God alone knows what this year holds in store for us. Whatever is asked of us we can trust *the Lord of Life* to hold us by the hand and guide us through.

Amen!