

Mary, The Mother of God  
(Numbers 6:22-27 / Luke 2:16-21)  
01.01.2020

There are certain grace-filled moments in all our lives – really special, somewhat unique, events – that we are inclined to ponder again and again. We treasure their memory for a lifetime. When our thoughts bring us back to those moments we feel profound peace in our hearts, a sense of genuine contentment inhabits the very depths of our being. Sometimes the thought – and, as it were, a renewed virtual experience – of an especially graced moment in our existence comes back to us when we most need strength and courage to get through the daunting challenge of a present difficulty.

Luke's gospel speaks of how Mary knew certain exceptionally blessed instances as she pursued her life's journey with Jesus. Doubtless, Mary invoked these most precious moments she shared with her Son in the more distressing hours that were also part of her experience as the Mother of Jesus.

On this day when we celebrate Mary under the title *Mother of God* (the Latin Church's translation of the title *Theotokos, God-bearer*) – one of the most ancient appellations given to her – I find myself recalling that moment in the gospel story (in John 19) when Jesus designated Mary to be our Mother too. As Jesus hung upon the cross on Calvary's Hill – enduring His passion, about to fall asleep in death – He gave Mary to His *Beloved Disciple*, and through him to the whole Church. Pointing in the direction of His Mother, the dying Jesus said: *Behold your Mother. Ecce Mater tua.*

Mary would have heard Jesus speak those words as He addressed them to the Beloved Disciple since she also stood close to the cross alongside John, together with the few other faithful women John's account mentions. As Mary heard Jesus pronounce the word *mother* I am sure she would have felt deeply moved within. What mother of a dying child would not be touched to hear the one whom they had borne in their womb, and were now being called to let go of, pronounce the title *mother*? As Mary heard Jesus call her mother, I can well imagine how she would have recalled all those sacred moments in the Jesus story – the blessed moments she had shared with her Son – which we are told *she pondered and treasured in her heart.*

In a meditation he wrote for this day many years ago St John-Paul II considers how the words we heard in today's gospel passage were relevant throughout Mary's lifetime, even over and beyond the earthly life of Christ. He wrote: *The Octave of Christmas ends with the first day of the new year, which is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, venerated as the Mother of God. The Gospel reminds us that 'she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). So she did in Bethlehem, on Golgotha at the foot of the cross, and on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended in the Upper Room.*

St John-Paul goes on to consider how Mary, fulfilling her role as *Mother of the Church* and of humanity – in a ministry stemming from the mission given to her on Calvary's Hill – remains faithful, holding all things concerning Christ, and also concerning us, in her heart.

To the words I have already quoted, let me add the following lines from St John-Paul's meditation: *And so she does today. The Mother of God and human beings keeps in her heart all of humanity's problems, great and difficult, and meditates upon them. The 'Alma Redemptoris Mater' walks with us and guides us with motherly tenderness towards the future. Thus she helps humanity cross all the 'thresholds' of the years, the centuries, the millenniums, by sustaining their hope in the One who is the Lord of history.*

Is it not a consoling thought for us to realise that, as we traverse all the happenings of our lives, we are being carried in thought and prayer? None of us is ever entirely alone. The Lord is always with us. Those who are in communion with Christ are also in communion with us – whether or not either we or they consciously realise this to be true! The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us *Christ who lives forever is constantly making intercession for us*. The Church's prayer, which is relentless, unceasingly carries us and all her children along. As part of the Church's prayer, at the heart of the Church's prayer, we have the assurance that Mary's thoughts and her pleading on our behalf are unfailing.

Tenacity in hope for her children is a typical maternal quality. When all others may give up on a child – including the child him or her self – a mother won't let hope fall. She will continue to trust; she will *hope against all hope*, to use Paul's phrase.

So, Mary, our Mother of Holy Hope, intercedes for us continually – pleading for our conversion to Christ, her Son.

Fittingly, on this first day of the new year, the Church's liturgy invites us to listen to the very beautiful formula of blessing we heard in the first reading taken from the Book of Numbers: a text which is referred to as the *Aaronic* or *Priestly Blessing*. The purpose and intention of the choice of this text for today's first reading is to help us see our lives – and all life – as blessed.

Might I suggest that a good exercise for us today would be to consider some of the particularly graced moments we have experienced up to this day in the unfolding of our life stories?

Often these occasions of blessing will have been very simple moments – so simple that we could easily overlook them or even forget them altogether. Frequently they will have been so intimate that we might find ourselves shy to recall them – certainly shy to do so in conversation with others, but they can and they should be remembered. We would do well to ponder them, to treasure them, in the depths of our hearts. In the course of this day, in a moment of quiet, let us dare to bring some such blessed moments present to our spirits. We will feel all the better for doing so.

In remembering our blessings, let us bear in mind that when we are blessed this is so that we may bless others in our turn. Yes, we are blessed in order to bless; we are blessed to become a source of benediction for people whom the Lord sets upon our path, so that we may encourage them with our love as we journey together along *the way*.

Entering into this new year, it is good for us to recall the responsibility *the Lord and Giver of Life* has confided to us: the responsibility to be channels of His grace and peace.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that *Christ is our peace*. Peace surrounded Jesus' coming into this world and peace accompanied Him throughout His entire lifetime on earth. The proclamation of peace was at the heart of Jesus' ministry – and so it remains at the heart of the Church's mission to the world. We are called as Christians to announce the gospel of peace.

Even in the horrors of Jesus' sacred Passion peace emanated from our Crucified Lord. *Peace* is the word with which the Risen Jesus greeted His disciples when He appeared to them after His resurrection from the dead. We are reminded that peace was Christ's parting gift to His disciples each and every time we celebrate the Eucharist. After our recitation of the Lord's Prayer Christ's words are recalled for us: *Peace I leave you. My peace I give to you*. When

Jesus' first disciples heard the Lord speak those words, as He took leave of them, they will have recalled how, when He first sent them out on mission, He had told them: *Whatever house you enter into, let your first words were to be: Peace be to this house.*

The same mission Jesus confided to those He sent out during His earthly ministry has been confided to us for this day and age. We are all called to be bearers of Christ's peace, witnesses to His life and His gospel. As *Christ-bearers* – men, women and children who are called to carry Christ within us, as Mary bore the God-Man in her womb – we are called to be men, women and children who are true *channels of peace*. Our vocation is to be Christian missionaries; it is to carry Christ to others, and, in so doing, to transmit to them God's gift made visible in Christ: what Francis of Assisi saw to be *Pax et Bonum, Peace and all things good*. Peace and goodness should flow through us and reach out to others by our intermediary. Our whole concern should be to bring *peace* – that is, to bring *Christ* – into every encounter we have. It should to find peace in every situation of our lives – daring to see how in all things Christ always precedes us. Whatever we are led to traverse, Christ is already present there, for, faithful to His promise, *He is with us always*.

We will be sent forth from this Eucharist – as we are from every Eucharistic celebration – in *peace... to love and serve the Lord*, to bring Christ and His Good News wherever we go, *to announce the Gospel of the Lord... to glorify the Lord by our lives*.

As Christians we are called not just to be *heralds of peace*, but, more than that, to be engaged in the work of peace; to be peacemakers by our whole way of living.

Let us welcome the peace offered to us here. Let us hear as a confidence whispered into the ear of our hearts not only the words of Aaron's Priestly blessing, but also those words which Jesus spoke to those who were His intimate companions: *My peace I give you*. Hearing those words spoken into our hearts by the One whom we should not shy away from calling our *Tremendous Lover* (to use the late Dom Eugene Boylan's poignant title for Christ), let us ponder them in our hearts and truly treasure them... not in order to guard them jealously, not in order to hold them under lock and key, but to share them with those whom we love and all those to whom we are sent with for mission to share something of God's own life which we all carry within us.

Like Mary who *pondered and treasured everything concerning Christ in her heart*, so we are called to take moments when we are still – moments of quiet contemplation – in which we *let the tide of memories wash over us*. As we allow *the gentle tide* of good and blessed memories to wash over us, we will find it serving a medicinal purpose. We will experience how these good memories can revitalise our lives. The *gentle tide of good memories* can be like healing water for us – healing water in which to bathe the wounds of our broken hearts. We may, of course, find that, just like sea-salt water, *the tide of memories* may sometimes cause us to feel a little sting – if for no other reason than the realisation they awaken within us that things are not now as they once were in our lives. The important thing, however, is to listen to *the gentle whisper* heard as we bathe in the tide of God's grace. May we hear the One who bathes us in the tide of His love – that tide which flowed from His open heart upon the cross, assuring us that He is with us and will never abandon us. When we listen to Christ, then, whatever our life situation may be, we will discover contentment – sublime comfort in the knowledge of His loving presence by our side and His murmur into the ear of our hearts.

As we listen to Christ whisper His word of solace to us today, may we open ourselves to His gift of peace which no one and nothing can ever take away. There is a poetic line in a poem based upon the experience of *Holy Island* (Lindisfarne) which speaks of *the breath of wisdom* which is given *to refresh our minds each day*. The same poet speaks of *the gentle breeze of God's love*. May we allow *the gentle breeze of God's love* not only to brush over us today, but to descend deep down within us... until it becomes one with our breath and we become one with Love's own breath within us, which is God's Holy Spirit.

With our each inhalation, we breathe in God's new life. May each breath we breathe from this time forth be welcomed as a blessing until we breathe our last breath when we *fall asleep in the Lord*.

May Mary, the one we celebrate today as the *Mother of God – Christ's Mother* and *our Mother* – be there for us when we breathe our last breath and gently fall into the slumber of death. Her presence to us at that hour is a grace which the Church has us implore of Mary continually in that well-known invocation (God's People's response to the *Hail Mary* of the angel Gabriel) which many of us will hear others pray for us as we live our final passage from this life into the fullness of life: *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death*.

Amen!