

Mary – Holy Mother of God – December 31-Jan. 1, 2023

Today we have several themes that we could speak about. Besides celebrating the holy day of Mary, Holy Mother of God, today is the World Day of Peace and also, of course, New Year's Day.

This being the beginning of the new year is probably what has our greatest attention. We are quite likely thinking about changes and improvements we would like to make in our life in the coming year. However, before plunging into plans for the new year, it is important that we look back over the past year and ask God's forgiveness for our sins and selfishness and give thanks to God for all the ways that God blessed us and cared for us.

Our Mass today, as always is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God and the greatest way to give thanks to God in union with the eternal praise of Jesus to God the Father.

We certainly thank God for various material blessings that came our way but let us not forget the blessings and healings that have come to us through the sacraments in this past year as well as all spiritual growth that we have been able to make in this past year.

It is our gratitude for these blessings that will give us confident assurance in his blessings and help for the many needs we will have in the coming year. It is our remembrance of God's faithfulness to us that, as with Mary in the gospel, will carry us through whatever we will have to face in the coming year.

In today's first reading, God gives instructions to Moses for the priests in regard to the people as they are setting out for the Promised land. Prior to this there had been many instructions given to the priests about their duties to God in offering daily sacrifices to God. Today, we hear about how the priests are to relate to their fellow Israelites. They are to bless the people and continually remind the people of how much God cares for them. So it is that the blessing prayer they are to use reminds the people that God is keeping them as his possession, wants to show is gracious care to them, and that he wants them to experience his kindness and peace.

The blessing prayer speaks of God shining his face upon them and us. We should not think of this as something like the sun shining down from the sky on us, but of God wanting them to

experience his great intimacy and closeness to them. God wants them to know that he is always with them, walking with them and within the hearts of each one. We hear this same desire of God and message for us in the words of Paul to the Galatians in the second reading. Paul tells them that the coming of Jesus marks the fullness of time in which God is ransoming the Jews from the burden of the Law and adopting all others in the world also as his children. We are no longer slaves, he says, but rather all people who believe can now know in their hearts that God is their Father, and as children of God are heirs to all that God has promised. This, along with fully taking on our humanity in the person of Jesus, is an amazing outreach of God to humanity. If we would open ourselves to receive this gift, we would never again consider our faith to be a burden.

In the first reading God promised his blessing to his people, now in the birth of Jesus we have received the fulfillment and ultimate manifestation of God's blessing.

In this Christmas season we exchange wonderful gifts, but how well have we received the greatest and most transforming and life-restoring gift of God to the world in the birth of Jesus and the new union of God with us? It is such an amazing gift that it is hard for us to fully appreciate. This is why we are grateful also for God's gift of Mary and Joseph to us. What a gift to be able to learn from Joseph how to trust and obey God even though we cannot fully understand all that he is doing. And especially what gift is to learn from Mary how to hold God's words of revelation to us in our hearts and ponder their meaning.

Paul, spoke about God sending his Son to us in the fullness of time. In the birth of Jesus as Messiah there is the full blossoming of the expectations of God's people – a shifting from a time of anticipation of God's Anointed One to a time of fulfillment. The Holy Family is at the center of this shift. God is moving in surprising ways and there is need for humility and openness to the new ways that God is acting. There is a lot to think about and ponder.

In today's gospel, the shepherds arrive and share the message of the angels and the confirmation that Jesus is Savior, Messiah and Lord. The gospel then tells us that "Mary kept all these

things, reflecting on them in her heart.” -- This is not the only time that St. Luke tells us that Mary treasured or reflected on things in her heart. It happened earlier when the angel Gabriel came to tell her that she was chosen to bear God’s Son. It will happen again when Joseph and Mary take the child Jesus to be consecrated at the temple and are met by Simeon and Anna. And then, again, we will be told that Mary keeps all things in her heart when Joseph and Mary find their twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple speaking with the religious leaders there.

On this day we celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God – a feast day that is actually more about the identity of Jesus’ nature being fully human as well as fully divine. Mary however, participated in bringing Jesus, the divine Word of God, to flesh. She must have pondered and reflected on all that she heard and experienced along the way. As she pondered these things she surely grew in the courage she would need to face whatever lay ahead for her and her son.

But, let’s not leave our reflections there. Let us ponder, along with Mary, what we have heard and experienced of her son in our lives. As baptized persons we all have the new life of God in us and have been affected by that life in us and around us whether we are fully aware of it or not. --- If we have experienced the mercy of Jesus, how has it put in us the gift of gratitude and the ability to extend mercy to others?

If we have received healing, how has that experience or encounter with the Lord reshaped our lives and our sense of purpose in life?

If we have known darkness and fear, how has the presence of Jesus as Savior given us the strength to stand with courage and keep moving forward?

If we have been in need of correction, how have our paths been straightened?

Let us hold these moments in our hearts and, following the example of Mary, never tire of taking them out to reflect on their meaning and, in the coming new year, be open and obedient like Mary and Joseph to God’s call to share these reflections and our faith story with others to help them on their journey of faith.