

Mary the Mother of God

When we come to the end of one year and prepare to begin another, we are all invited to look back and look forward. We can look back over 2022 and try to remember the ways that God has blessed us over the year. We can prepare for 2023 by looking forward in hope to what God has in store for us.

Today we are invited to do that with Mary. On this eighth day of Christmas, we honour her as the mother of Jesus, the mother of our God. The Church has for a long time celebrated the Maternity of Mary, but we used to do that on October 11th. It is only in more recent years that this feast has been restored to January 1st. We also celebrate this day as the World Day of Peace, introduced by Pope Paul VI.

In his encyclical *Marialis cultus* written in 1974, Pope Paul VI wrote, “This celebration, assigned to January 1st in conformity with the ancient liturgy of the city of Rome, is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation. It is meant also to exult the singular dignity which this mystery brings to the holy Mother...through whom we were found worthy...to receive the Author of life. It is likewise a fitting occasion for renewed adoration of the newborn Prince of Peace, for listening once more to the glad tidings of angels, and for imploring from God, through

the Queen of Peace, the supreme gift of peace. For this reason, we have instituted World Day of Peace.” Oh, how much we have longed for peace this year, as we have witnessed the heartbreak of the people of Ukraine under Russian attack.

The unusual readings for today reflect something of the changing history of what we celebrate on the first day of the year. The reading from the Book of Numbers contains the blessing of Aaron. What does it mean to be blessed by God? Does it mean that those blessed by God will have a trouble-free life? I don't think so. I think it has much more to do with God's protective hand being upon us. I think it means that God is looking after us, no matter what is happening in our lives. Mary was blessed by God. But that did not free her from the challenges and uncertainty that all mothers have as they care for their children. How many nights did Mary have to sit up with Jesus when he would not stop crying and she didn't know why? Joseph was blessed by God. But he still had to flee to Egypt with Mary and the new born Jesus. When we listen to that blessing of Aaron, we could well remember some of the ways that God has blessed us in 2022. Some of the ways that God has blessed us may not have looked like a blessing at the time.

Blessings are not always recognised at the time we experience them. Some blessings are painful. It is only

when we have had time to ponder on those experiences that we may have found where God was. We discover Mary doing that today. There was much of what she experienced that she did not understand. There were many things in her life that caused her pain. We are told that she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Mary shows us how to prayerfully reflect upon what is happening in our lives so that we may discover how God is watching over us, how God's protective hand is there.

At the turn of the year, we need to be sure of who we are and where we are going. St. Paul offers us the assurance that we are children of God and that we have been given a share in the very Spirit of Jesus so that we may go where Jesus leads us. This Spirit allows us to call God Father. God has not only made us his children but heirs as well. We can begin the New Year confident that we are loved by God. Like Mary we can step into the future trusting in God to show us the way that leads to life. Mary's "yes" to the invitation to become the Mother of God was a step into the dark. And yet she was able to say, "Let it be done to me according to your will." We too say yes to God at the beginning of a new year. Wherever the Lord leads us this year ultimately, we are being led to be with God forever.

In our gospel today we make our way to Bethlehem with the shepherds. With them we find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. The shepherds knew who that baby was because the angels had told them. They then told everybody else that they could find about this child. Today we can thank God that we are among those who have been told about this child. In different ways, through different people we have become people of faith.

As we look back over 2022 it would be good to remember some of the people who have helped us to grow in our faith. Perhaps they are the people who have challenged us to live what we say we believe. Perhaps they are the people who have helped us to find light when we could only see darkness. Perhaps they are the people who have prayed with us when we felt that we could no longer pray on our own. Whoever they are they have revealed something of the face of God to us.

As we look forward to a new year, we can ask God to help us to be there for others, as others have been there for us, so that together we can keep growing as people of faith and love.