

[Readings: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 76; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21]

Here is a little piece of Bible trivia: In all the centuries of archeological digs and explorations, the oldest copy of a biblical text which dates back to about 650 B.C. is a parchment that contains the words of the blessing we hear in today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers.

The Original Blessing comes from God Himself, and is a tradition that God expects you and me to continue as we begin a new year. A blessing is gratuitous. It is a gift not earned but granted voluntarily, usually out of love. By blessing the Israelites as they journey towards the Promised Land, Aaron and his sons remind the people that their future is in God's hands. The blessing is that the people may enjoy God's providence, prosperity and peace. The term "shalom" means spiritual health and happiness.

Most blessed among God's people is Mary, whose maternity we celebrate today. In today's Gospel, Luke seems to imply that Mary had not grasped the fullness of God's plans for her: She was reflecting on what the shepherds had said. After all, the newborn baby is described as the Christ, as a savior, as a Lord! It is more than understandable that it would take time for Mary to understand and to accept the title that the Church would use to describe her: Theotokos, the "God-bearer." You and I need to continue to ponder what this means to us and to our lives. This title provoked great controversy in the early centuries of the Church and would eventually lead to a great schism or divide.

By having God's Son, the Eternal Word, born of a woman, God has invited you and me to participate in the mystery of salvation. God, out of love for every human being who has ever been born or will be born, became one like us in all things but sin. He becomes one of us in the same way every other human being comes into being: "God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law." Here we come face to face with God's unique presence among us, and the faithful fulfillment of God's promise to Israel.

Who is this Christ Child, and what difference does He make in our lives? And what role does Mary have in our lives?

Mary was not simply a passive instrument in God's hands. Rather, in her acceptance of and firm "yes" to God's plan, Mary discovered and accepted new dimensions to her motherhood and discipleship. As her life unfolded, she constantly presented the Savior to the world, just as in our readings today, she presents the newborn Christ to the shepherds who visit. She invites us to true worship before her Son, and to treasure and immerse ourselves into His divine Mystery. How do we do this?

St. Francis of Assisi says this: First, do the necessary. Then do the possible. And before long, you will find yourself doing the impossible!

In addition to being a day to celebrate the maternity of Mary, today is also a World Day of Prayer for Justice and Peace. It is striking to think of how much violence Mary was close to. As a betrothed but unwed mother, she faced the possibility of death by stoning. Then she found out that the king wanted her child, along with many others, dead, and he conducted genocide to accomplish his goal. Finally, she had to witness the violent death of her son on a cross. Violence and death, though, are not the whole story, then or now. Peace can grow in the ashes of violence, and new life can come out of death. At least that's what happens in God's way of doing things.

Pray for peace today, both for yourself and the world. But don't only pray; do something to help bring peace to conflict. As Pope St. Paul VI said to us: "If you want peace, work for justice. I wish you all a Happy and Blessed New Year, and I bless you with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are small matters compared to what lies with us.

AMEN!