

Mary, The Mother of God

Year B



FIRST READING
Numbers 6:22–27

PSALM
Psalm 67:2–8

SECOND READING
Galatians 4:4–7

GOSPEL
Luke 2:16–21

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PRAYER

Psalm 67:2–8

May God be gracious to us
and bless us
and make his face
to shine upon us,
that your way
may be known upon earth,
your saving power
among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
Let the nations
be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

READING THE WORD

First Reading Numbers 6:22–27

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:
Speak to Aaron and his sons,

saying, Thus you shall bless the
Israelites: You shall say to them,
The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine
upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance
upon you, and give you peace.
So they shall put my name on the
Israelites, and I will bless them.

Second Reading Galatians 4:4–7

When the fullness of time had come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman,
born under the law, in order to re-
deem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as
children. And because you are chil-
dren, God has sent the Spirit of his
Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Fa-
ther!” So you are no longer a slave but
a child, and if a child then also an heir,
through God.

Gospel Luke 2:16–21

The shepherds went with haste and
found Mary and Joseph, and the
child lying in the manger. When
they saw this, they made known
what had been told them about
this child; and all who heard it were

amazed at what the shepherds told
them. But Mary treasured all these
words and pondered them in her
heart. The shepherds returned, glo-
rifying and praising God for all they
had heard and seen, as it had been
told them.

After eight days had passed, it was
time to circumcise the child; and he
was called Jesus, the name given by
the angel before he was conceived
in the womb.

HEARING THE WORD

“Transforming Power”

The New Year’s Day Litur-
gy closes the Christmas
octave with the celebration
of the Feast of Mary, the
Mother of God. The ecu-
menical council of Ephesus
held in 431 AD proclaimed
Jesus’ mother “theotokos”,
which, in Greek, means
“the Mother of God”. This
feast celebrates both the
divine nature of the child
born in Bethlehem, and the
great dignity of his Moth-
er, through whom this ex-

traordinary event occurred. With Mary's cooperation, Jesus united in himself the human and the divine nature, thus bringing God's presence into the world in a unique and new way. Since 1967, the Church also celebrates this day the World Day of Peace. Both of these feasts celebrated today, even though they bear different names, celebrate the peace that came into the world through the transformative presence of God in Jesus, whom Mary brought into the world.

The priestly blessing of the congregation concludes a section found in chs 5-6 of the Book of Numbers, which contains a wide variety of laws and instructions on how to maintain ritual purity in the Israelite camp. The instructions in this section were intended to ensure the harmony and peace within the community journeying through the desert. They needed peace and harmony with God and one another in order to survive in this hostile environment. At the conclusion of this collection, God bestows his blessing as the sign of approval and support for those who desired to achieve holiness by following them. These rules were very detailed and challenging, but God offered his grace through the blessing imparted by "Aaron and his sons" who served as priests. They were responsible for offering prayers and sacrifices, and for blessing the people

in God's name: "they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them".

The blessing consists of three lines, each containing two verbs: the first represents God's action, while the second indicates its outcome. Thus, the blessing indicates that God will protect his people from destruction - "keep them", and care for their wellbeing - "be gracious to them". However, the most significant action of God consists in giving his people peace. Peace - "shalom" in the Hebrew language - encompasses the entire human existence referring to health, security, wellbeing, material prosperity and long life. The blessing of peace, which concludes a set of instructions, reveals that an individual and the community can achieve that state of peace by following God's ways. God's instruction, if followed, can transform human life, even in the midst of the troubled world, into the desired peaceful existence.

The second reading contains yet another conclusion of an important part of a biblical book, the Letter to the Galatians. Here, Paul closes his important exposition on righteousness by faith with the words, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son" who was "born of a woman, born under the law", which highlights that Jesus was truly a human being and an Israelite. As the Son

of God and a human being, Jesus brought redemption into the world. For Paul, redemption is about freeing people from slavery to sin, which Jesus accomplished on the cross. The result of this freedom is adoption of those who believe in him as God's children. The redemptive event which took place on the cross led to transformation of fallen and enslaved humanity into a new family of God's children because, in the words of Paul, "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Gal 3:26). The new status of "adopted children" brings along what the blessing of Aaron and his sons meant to secure, namely peace with God, peace with fellow human beings and the fullness of life. The presence of the Spirit in "our hearts" is a visible manifestation of this blessing at work. Jesus' coming into the world resulted in transformation of the deeply divided human family enslaved by its sins into God's family, which can live in peace and harmony.

The Gospel passage narrates the shepherds' visit to "Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger". These shepherds arrive "with haste", which recalls Mary's haste when she went to visit Elisabeth after the annunciation in order to share the joy of being chosen as God's mother (Luke 1:39). Just as Mary did in response to the message of the angel Gabriel,

so the shepherds rushed to share the joy of the saviour's birth which was announced to them by an angel (Luke 2:10-12).

It is crucial to know that in the world of Jesus' day, the shepherds were among the least respectable society members. In the common opinion, they were rootless drifters and notoriously unreliable and untrustworthy vagrants. The word of a shepherd had little or no value to their fellow Israelites. Nevertheless, the shepherds in today's story arrived at the manger and faithfully "made known what had been told to them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherd told them". The shepherds' conscientious and reliable report shows that this rugged band of wanderers was transformed into a group of credible witnesses. The encounter with Jesus transformed these lowly and ordinary individuals into witnesses. Furthermore, Luke reports that they went away "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them". The message which they heard from the angels included the proclamation of "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14). Carrying this message, these poor and rootless men became the first evangelizers who spread out to declare to the world that the long awaited saviour had arrived, and with him peace is possible on earth. They were among the first who exper-

rienced the transforming power of Jesus the Saviour and became the messengers of peace.

The readings of the feast of Mary, the Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace focus on God's transforming power working through Jesus and bringing peace to the human community. Aaron and his sons were commanded to bless the people in recognition that living according to God's instructions will bring them peace. Jesus fully manifested this transforming power by his redemptive death on the cross, which opened the possibility for the divided and enslaved humanity to become God's family through faith in Jesus. The transformative power of Jesus' presence changed the wandering shepherds into joyful proclaimers of the good news. All these events speak of the transformative power of God that can bring about peace in the world. The role of Christians is to become like Mary - to bring Jesus and his transformative power into the world through their faith and lifestyle, which he taught. In doing so they, like the shepherds, can become the bearers of the good news of God's peace which transforms the world. At the beginning of the New Year, the prayer of the psalmist, "May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him", is a truly fitting one for those who seek the honour of being the channels of God's blessing and peace.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The readings of today's feast bring to mind the idea of the transforming power of blessing. We all believe in the power of blessings, which our parents or guardians impart to us within our African community. We see in the first reading from the book of Numbers that the Jewish community also had strong faith in the blessing imparted to them. Such blessing demonstrated the power and will of the almighty God for them, the power that could surely transform their lives for the better. Today the priest is going to impart to us the blessing using the same words that Moses used to bless the people of Israel ages ago. However, the question arises on this first day of the year, whether this blessing means that we are not going to encounter difficulties or problems in the course of the year? Is this blessing going to magically make our lives all smooth sailing?

The answer to the above question is the resounding "no"; we are going to encounter difficulties and problems. However, the great gift that we have is that through the light of faith we can rise above those difficulties and confront them successfully. The blessing that is imparted to us today will help us to do just that. It will transform our lives in that we shall come to see things in life with the eyes of

faith. We will see each event that happens or will happen as a part of God's plan for us. The most interesting and significant part of the blessing is that God will give us peace. We are going to find a sense of interior peace in the midst of all the difficulties that we shall encounter.

Our daily experiences in our society are, unfortunately, often negative and discouraging. We see that in our society, people or leaders are inclined to wickedness and selfishness. They only want to grab the nation's wealth that every citizen is supposed to benefit from, and use it for themselves and their families. These are the things that lead to disagreements and divisions in our society, For us in Africa, these divisions even cut across ethnic lines and religious affiliations. However, we are called to bring peace to all because God, whom we call our Father, has given us peace that ought to be shared. Thus if we have received such a great gift from God then we cannot go out to seek vengeance or look at other people as dangerous enemies that need to be avoided or eliminated. Instead, we are called to be bringers and channels of peace wherever we find ourselves, in schools, homes and places of work.

The Gospel reminds us that we do not need to look for extraordinary events of life in order to nourish and support our faith, and the

faith of others. The shepherds only saw a small helpless child, but in him they recognised the saviour of the world. A true follower of Christ is the one who hears Jesus and is moved to action. Mary, our mother, whom we celebrate today, heard the word of God and treasured it in her heart. She had the capacity to see the transforming power of God and his plan for her life. From her we can learn not to be easily upset by the daily disappointments in life but to be good ambassadors of peace. By doing so and rising above life's disappointments, we can truly become the source of blessing to others.

PROVERB

*“Do not rush
the night,
the sun
will always rise
for its own sake.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What are the attitudes that I have within me that can easily bring disagreements and division among my peers? Am I the source of light and blessing for my family and peers?

Response to God:

This week I will reflect and pray with gratitude for all the blessings and gifts I have been given. I will seek to understand how to employ them to carry God's light and blessings to others.

Response to your World:

In my personal prayers, I will remember those people who are in troubled countries, those who cannot afford the basic needs of life. In our prayer meeting, we discuss how can we be the messengers of peace and source of blessings for others.

PRAYER

*Lord our God,
on the threshold
of this New Year,
we thank you
for giving us Jesus
as our saviour
and the prince of peace.
May his presence in our lives
increase our faith in you
and bring us lasting peace,
so that
filled with every blessing
and peace
we may become
true ambassadors of peace
everywhere we go.
We ask this
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*