

Solemnity of Mary, The Mother of God

Year C



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, say-
ing, Thus you shall bless the Israel-
ites: 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 or-
der to redeem those who were un-
der the law, so that we might receive
adoption as children. And because
you are children, God has sent the
Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
crying, “Abba! Father!” 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

“The Blessing”

The start of a new year is
an occasion for the celebra-
tion of hopes and expecta-
tions regarding the future.
For Catholic Christians, New
Year’s Day is also the Solemn-
ity of Mary, the Mother of
God, and the World Day of
Peace. However, these cel-
ebrations are only possible
because God has poured his
blessings upon the world,
which is the dominant
theme of today’s liturgy.

Blessing was an essential
feature of Israel’s life. The Is-
raelites understood blessing
as something very real and
concrete, something that
could be seen, felt and ex-
perienced in their daily life.
Thus, blessing meant having
numerous children, abun-
dant harvests and fertile

flocks, good health, safety, and protection from enemies, and, above all, living a long life. To bless someone meant providing all these benefits. Obviously, only God was able to ensure that his people would enjoy all these privileges. Therefore, for an Israelite, having God's blessings was absolutely essential for living a dignified, happy, and successful life. Aaron's blessing in the first reading reflects this understanding.

Aaron and his sons were the first priests in Israel. In addition to offering sacrifices, they were entrusted with invoking God's blessing upon the people. Since the blessing formula from today's first reading was provided by God himself, it reflects God's own vision of his people's life. This blessing has a parallel structure consisting of three lines, with each line containing two phrases. The first phrase in each line evokes divine action, while the second describes its effect.

The first line, "the Lord bless you and keep you" calls for God's blessing shown in extending his protection over the people. Here, God's blessing finds its concrete expression in securing people's lives in all circumstances. Security, in the sense of being protected from death and destruction, is a very fundamental condition for all life. Hence, a plea for preservation of life is fundamental and stands at the very beginning of this blessing formula.

The second line, "the Lord make his face to shine upon

you, and be gracious to you" is a plea for God's grace. The expression, "making his face to shine upon someone", appears numerous times in the Old Testament, always referring to God's goodwill and benevolence, expressed through grace. The term "grace" refers to acts of kindness performed by someone superior for the benefit of someone lower in status. It implies that the recipient neither merits, nor can reciprocate, the gifts of the superior. Thus, the benevolent action of the superior flows purely from his or her goodwill. God, clearly the superior being, is asked to show such unmerited goodwill to his people.

The third line, "the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace", requests God's gift of peace. The expression, "to lift up the countenance [face]", refers simply to a smile. In biblical language, smiling upon someone means taking pleasure in, or having affection for, another. In this blessing, this expression refers to God's tender care for his people. Like an affectionate father, God gives his people rest and peace, thus ensuring a life of general tranquillity and contentment.

Aaron's blessing contains a broad threefold depiction of the state of general blessedness. It recognizes that the people's good life depends entirely on God. Consequently, this blessing formula is really a plea for God's closeness, benevolence and affection, without which a secure and prosperous life would be impossible.

The words of Paul in the second reading form arguably the most powerful passage in the letter to the Galatians. Paul makes a sweeping statement which, in one breath, summarizes the whole of salvation history, by briefly describing the work and role of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. However, this incredibly rich and profound statement could itself be further summarized as containing a description of God's blessing poured upon humankind. God's work is described by the twice-repeated word "send". Firstly, God sent his Son into the world as a human being, born of a woman, and born a Jew. His mission is to redeem the people, which he accomplishes by his passion and resurrection. Secondly, after Jesus' ascension, God sent the Holy Spirit into the world. The Spirit enters the hearts and souls of the faithful with the cry "Abba! Father". This means that the Holy Spirit enables believers to call God their Father, and to relate to him in a very intimate way. In Hebrew, "Abba" was a term used by young children when addressing their fathers. Thus, the Holy Spirit unites believers with their Heavenly Father as children are united with their parents. Paul describes this union as "adoption". Jesus' mission of redemption, followed by the Holy Spirit's descent into the believers' hearts, enables human beings to become God's children. This process of adoption is nothing else but the fullest expression of God's blessing upon the humankind, because, as God's adopted children, believers are in possession of the fullest

and indestructible life – life eternal.

In the Gospel passage, the shepherds respond to the angelic proclamation, and go to meet the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. There, with their own eyes, they see that what the angels told them about the coming of the Saviour, Messiah and Lord, was true. Rejoicing and praising God, they then return to their flocks. Here, Luke confirms that this newborn child is the fulfilment of the longings and expectations of the people of Israel.

Next, the infant Jesus is circumcised according to the Mosaic law, and given the name “Jesus”. In the Bible, a person’s name is never merely a designation, rather, it is an expression of identity. The name is also something very real. To call out someone’s name means to come into that person’s presence. The word “Jesus” means “God saves”. Thus, the newborn child represents God saving his people. Angels told the shepherds that the Saviour has arrived, and Jesus’ given name confirms that proclamation. Like blessings, salvation is real and concrete. For the Israelites, blessing was about a happy life in this world alone. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus opens the way to a life that far surpasses all expectations and desires, regarding the quality of life, which the people of the Old Testament had. In the New Testament salvation generally means eternal life as already enjoyed by the faithful in this world, based on their faith in the Risen Lord. With Jesus, the effects of blessing move far

beyond this life and into eternity. Bringing salvation to the people, Jesus brought them the fullest and greatest blessing – a blissful and unending existence in God’s presence.

The liturgy of New Year’s Day is not merely a celebration of a new beginning, it is a reflection on the goal and purpose of the whole of human existence. In the blessing of Aaron we see a very natural human desire for security, prosperity and long life. This desire was fulfilled by God in two surprising and marvellous ways. First, the adoption Paul spoke of making the people God’s children. This adoption happens through the redemptive act of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit allowing believers to become God’s children. As God’s children they experience God’s presence and closeness. God “smiles” upon his children as their Father. Second, as a good and caring Father, securing the life of his children in the best possible way, God sent Jesus into this world as the peoples’ Saviour. True to his name, “God saves” Jesus brought salvation, which is the fullest imaginable blessing – the gift of eternal life in God’s presence. United with Jesus by faith, and in possession of eternal life, Christians can truthfully say with the psalmist, “God, our God, has blessed us.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

There is an African proverb which states that, “every misfortune is a blessing”. From the purely human point of view, it is very dif-

ficult to accept this proverb as true, because misfortune can hardly be counted as blessing. Misfortune looks more like a curse to be avoided rather than blessing to be sought. In the African context, blessing of children by their parents or elders is a wonderful life-giving thing, while a curse from a parent or an elder is greatly feared because it brings isolation and misfortune. In the same way, a blessing from God is desired, while God’s wrath is greatly feared. But blessings come in many forms.

We see the importance that God’s blessing held for the people of Israel in the first reading, with detailed instructions for Aaron on how to bless the people of God. The Israelites knew that without God’s blessing their life’s journey would not be a happy one. They believed that blessings are measured by how successful a person is in terms of wealth, health, a large family and security. Blessings led to an increase in all that was considered good and beautiful. The Old Testament portrays God’s blessing as what can be seen and felt. Therefore, life depended directly on God’s blessing, while its absence leads to a slow death.

The New Testament broadens our understanding of blessing. In the second reading we read that God’s greatest blessing is the grace of becoming God’s children through Christ. This blessing is attested by the presence of the Spirit, who helps us to cry out to God in words, “Abba Father”. This gift of becoming God’s children must not be taken for

granted. With Christ's salvific death and resurrection, God shows us a different logic of blessing. Thanks to Christ, what would normally be considered manifestations of a curse, such as sickness, weakness, misfortune, and even death, lose their destructive potential. These negative aspects of life do not mean that we have been rejected or cursed by God. We experience them because we are a part of a fallen world, we live among weak people, and inhabit frail bodies. But, thanks to Christ, even these experiences can become life-giving when endured with faith. Being a part of God's family means that even negative experiences will not ultimately destroy us. When we see ourselves as God's children, we know that God, as a good parent, stands by our side even in pain and misfortune. This is why Africans believe that even in misfortunes the Lord disguises our blessings, and that blessing is the grace of his unwavering presence.

We are used to counting our blessings according to our own reasoning. However, our faith teaches and challenges us to search for God's blessings in every situation, God uses every opportunity to bless us. Sometimes our blessings come through God's discipline in our life, and through challenges. But even those are meant to make us more obedient and responsible, and to protect us from dangers, especially when we lack wisdom to foresee them.

During this Christmas sea-

son, we must especially rejoice in the blessing that comes with ordinary moments of joy and togetherness that we share with others. Christmas festivities help us to step back and see the blessing in what we normally take for granted - the presence of a loved one or a friend. These are the blessings that come from belonging to God's family, and to the human family. Their value far surpasses all other forms of blessings that we might seek and cherish.

PROVERB

*“He who
wakes up
early in
the morning
receives
a bundle
of blessings.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What do I count as the greatest blessings in my life?
Do I see my faith and mem-

bership in the Church as a sign of God's blessing? How do I express my gratitude for these graces?

Response to God:

I will conclude every day of this week reflecting on the blessings I have received from God, and spend some time in the prayer of thanksgiving for all I have received.

Response to your World:

I will choose one of my most precious blessings, and find ways to share it with others. As a community, we will devise some practical ways to show to others that we consider being members of God's family as the greatest blessing we have received.

PRAYER

*Jesus my Savior,
thank you
for your many blessings
in my life,
and in the lives of all
who journey through this life
with me.
Teach me
to be more appreciative
of your gifts,
even in the midst
of this life's challenges and pain.
Continue to bless me
and all my dear ones,
and grant us hearts full of faith
to seek you and your blessings
in every life situation.
Amen.*