

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

First reading:

(Numbers 6.22-27)

The Blessing of God

In its original setting in the Bible, this passage comes at the end of a series of laws. It invokes the blessing of God on his people. The triple repetition makes it a strong and insistent blessing, calling the presence and protection of God on his people.

At a certain stage, in the 1960s, there was a great tendency to translate the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) as 'happy are the poor in spirit' etc. But God's blessing does not mean 'happiness' in the sense that the poor in spirit are singing and dancing, having fun. Rather, it means that God's protective hand is over them: nothing can go wrong, and God's guidance is looking after them, despite any appearances to the contrary. So, when the passage is read on this day, it does not mean that that Mary and her Son were always merry and having fun. Mary had the same troubles as any mother with a new baby, perhaps even postnatal depression. It does not mean that the baby Jesus never cried. Rather, God's protective hand was upon them in all their doings, their relationships and their troubles. For us, today, it means that this presence of the Lord was the beginning and guarantee of salvation.

Question:

What is the difference between being happy and being blessed??

Second reading:

(Galatians 4.4-7)

Mother of God

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul is not setting out to assert anything about the maternity of Mary. He is simply setting out to assert that we are no longer subject to the Law. Why not? Because Jesus, although a real human like ourselves, could call God his Father. As son and heir of God, Jesus is free of all restrictions and enslavements, and we too, plunged into Christ in baptism, as similarly heirs and free. All this depends on Jesus fully sharing our human nature. Paul just slips this in unquestioningly: 'born of a woman'. Where did he get his human existence from, if not from Mary? At the Council of Ephesus, Nestorius wanted Mary to be called 'Christotokos', or 'Christ-bearer', but the Council insisted that the man Jesus, who fully God, derived his whole being from Mary: she was 'Theotokos' - God-bearer'. The whole person who was God was born of Mary, not just a human Christ. From Mary he derived his genes, his DNA, his flesh and blood, his temperament (which was also divine), his habits of mind, his warmth of personality. He was utterly, frankly and joyfully human, and yet those who opened their eyes and ears to him could not forebear reverencing him as only God may be revered.

Question:

How much would Jesus have looked like his mother and had her characteristics?

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Gospel:

(Luke 2.16-21)

The Child in the Cattle Trough

The cosy picture of the bright-eyed child in the clean wooden manger (with the ox and the ass peeping in from a respectful distance) is misleading.

The picture is one of destitution. There was no room for the newborn in the normal living quarters, and the worried mother had to lodge him in the only space available, a feeding trough for cattle, perched on top of their fodder. That was where the ragged sheep minders found him.

They too were the poorest of the poor, no sheep of their own, just hired for the night. Perhaps they got a drink of goats' milk or a crust of bread for their shivering pains. Matthew does at least have the baby worshipped by those rather splendid Wise Men from the east, with their noble and symbolic gifts. No gifts forthcoming from today's rough crew.

As we worry about our post-Christmas waistlines, and set out on our prosperous New Year, it makes us reflect on where true blessedness lies, and who are the chosen ones of the Lord. Surely God could have rustled up more suitable worshippers for his Incarnate Son than these scruffy down-and-outs? No, unfortunately not.

Question:

Why is the material destitution of Mary and Jesus so strongly stressed?
