

## **SOLEMNITY of the MOTHER of GOD**

Today, as so many in the world celebrate the beginning of a new year, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Mother of God. It is the oldest of all Marian feasts in our liturgy. It is also a feast uniquely appropriate to those of us concerned with new beginnings, with new resolutions, and renewed hopes.

To the consternation of many non-Catholics, we sometimes let personal forms of piety towards Mary obscure the reasons behind our Church's devotion to her. Perhaps we, in our personal emotional involvement with Mary, even lose sight of her genuine place in our faith and Church, we run the very real risk of simply sentimentalizing her, and thereby trivializing Christ.

In fact there is very little in scripture that paints an historical portrait of Mary. What the church offers in its devotion towards her, however, is its own spiritual and prayerful experience, its reflections on her throughout the millennia. And this is, ultimately, to the good, because what we today understand of our Lady is a reflection of the Church's prayer and insight, of the Church being led by the Holy Spirit to develop an understanding of why Mary does in fact have a special role in our lives.

But we ought always to remember that development in the Church is about one thing only: that in our attempt to understand God, we grow in comprehension of the meaning of the Incarnation in our world and life. It is in this light that we must reflect on the Virgin Mary, Theotokos, Mother of God, mother of Jesus Incarnate. And just as Mary interpreted all things, pondered all things, in her heart, so does the Church reflect on her and the Incarnation through its liturgy, its writings and its faith. That is why her oldest feast is celebrated within the octave of Christmas, of Emmanuel, of God with us: for all devotion to Mary is a corollary to our devotion to, following of, and worship of Christ.

Today's readings help clarify this devotion, because they so intimately hint at the essential connection between Mary and her Son.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians tells us that by being born of a woman, born under the law, the son of God fully participates in the human condition. He is one of us, because of Mary. The very fact of Mary's physicality, her

embodiedness, her fleshliness, and therefore Jesus' own body, is the saving link between God and humanity. Through this link Paul writes that we become heirs of Christ, and intimately understand God as Abba, the way her Son understood His Father. It is Mary's profound human kinship with Jesus that allows us to see in her a pledge of the destiny that God has promised all his children. Mary becomes the measure of who we are and who we are to be, and are even now becoming through grace. In effect, in understanding Mary we begin to understand ourselves as loved by God.

The gospel we have heard today is almost an exact repeat of what was read at the Dawn Mass on Christmas. It is worth noting that in this gospel the shepherds, considered among the marginalized, the poor, the outsider, are those first informed of Christ's birth, and who first visit the infant Jesus. It is the outsider who bears the good news of what the angels have announced: that the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, has been born. It is the outsider that helps Mary to deeply know her Son. In Luke, Mary represents the ideal believer, for she hears the good news and ponders it in her heart, and fully responds to it. Her heart becomes the place of discovering Jesus, and who he truly is. Just as our own hearts must become that place of response. Mary's entire life, and the Church's entire life, is centered on that process of pondering who that child now born to us really is. Mary in contemplating her son becomes the Church reflecting on the Incarnation. It is this aspect of Mary's motherhood that is most important for our new year, a year in which we continue our own journey of the heart towards God.

We make a major mistake if we think that from the moment of the Annunciation Mary completely knew, or understood, the full significance of her Son. Mary pondered on who that child would be from her "Yes" at the Annunciation, when the first cells of God incarnate began to grow and divide within her, to his birth and squalling infancy, his youth, maturing, leaving home; her hearing about him from others, hearing about what he had said, what he had done; the healings and exorcisms, the confrontations, the way of the cross, seeing him nailed to the cross, her holding his dead body, the body that had been within her womb.

And each step of the way, she had to re-assert that "yes" of the Annunciation, ever and more deeply understanding what her response

meant. She spent her life pondering the visible Word of God that was and is her Son. She grew in knowing him, in comprehending the mystery of God Incarnate. And as Mary pondered that visible Word, we too must ponder that Word in scripture, that Word in each other, that Word in the created world around us. We too are asked to incarnate Jesus in our lives. This is needed by all of us in this new year, in this strange, confusing and dangerous age. For in incarnating Jesus in our hearts we discover our truest selves.

Reflection calls for response. And Mary's response to God ought not to be thought of as simply a choice between right and wrong, good or bad, some sort of ethical or moral decision. Nor should our choices be only that. Mary gives us an example of what our choice as Christians really implies: that each genuine choice we make reveals who we are and is not simply what we do. In our choices we act out of our self, and tell of our self. Christian, human, freedom of choice is not about choosing which film we will go to see, or what we will wear, or what we will own: it is about how we reveal and define ourselves on that journey to God.

Mary's choice was not right or wrong, it stemmed from who she was and knew herself to be as a daughter of Israel, a child of God.

She is blessed of all women, and we are told in the great blessing of Aaron from the Book of Numbers in today's first reading, that God will smile upon those he loves and who love him, that his face will shine upon them. And today, this New Year's day, we know that the face that smiles upon Mary as she holds him in her arms, presenting Him to His Heavenly Father in the Temple, is that of her new-born Son Jesus. This is the face we yearn to see, the face of God made flesh, born of the Virgin Mary.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella