

Homily
January 1, 2023
Solemnity of Mary Mother of God
25:20-35:09

Happy New Year.

Every year we gather on this morning and there is much to celebrate, is there not? The Church over the centuries has celebrated many things on this day.

When I was a boy, it was known as the Circumcision of the Lord, what we heard in the Gospel. And then, with the reform of the Liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, it became known as what we list it as today, the Feast of Mary Mother of God, the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, the first Tabernacle, if you will.

But soon after that was done, Pope Saint Paul VI urged the world, especially Catholic Christians to pray for peace on this day. And he named it "The World Day for Peace." This latter seems rather apt for us, doesn't it, at this time?

But all three are important: The Lord fulfilling a ritual, Mary being celebrated as the Mother of God, and Peace.

So it may seem a little odd that we start the liturgy's readings today with the Book of Numbers. Numbers? Why is it called "Numbers"? Have you ever thought about that? Some have. Some are just looking at me, "Come on, Father, just tell us." Numbers. There are two censuses taken in this book – in Chapter 1 and Chapter 26. The two censuses are of the people during the Wilderness Journey, at the beginning of it and at the end of it. Thus, Numbers! For all of you left brain people, that's exciting. For the rest of us, it's like, "Okay..."

Our reading comes from Chapter 6. It's the very end of the first 6 chapters. What is being done in those 6 chapters is that the people, through Moses and God, are being organized. They are being organized socially, militarily. They're also working with the priests, the Levites, to structure their ministry of which we hear just a small part in the person of Aaron today. But they are also setting aside certain people called "Nazarites," who lived out the Covenant Law rigorously -- sort of like what we have today in secluded monasteries, like the Carmelites or the Cistercians.

Our reading is mostly a blessing. It's called the "Blessing of Aaron." It is one of the most beautiful, simple blessings ever written. In fact, **it is** poetry. We don't recognize it as poetry so much, but in the Hebrew, it is truly poetry. There are only three verses. And they are addressed to the entire people. Three verses hoping for the material and spiritual well-being of the people.

Each verse reveals an action of God that results in something good for God's people.

The Lord bless you and keep you. To bless. In this case, it is to be granted by God all that God wants to confer on the people. Everything that he would have them be and live. The result will be, "keep you." That is God's continued loving providence. Keeping them as his people, yes. But keeping them by meeting their needs.

The Lord lift up his face upon you and be gracious to you. The face of God, spoken of in the Psalms and other poetry from Isaiah and Jeremiah -- seeking the face of God. And yet that is a horrible possibility of being annihilated. But here the face of God is looking upon them with favor. Not to be feared, but to be embraced. Gracious. What is "gracious"? It's the undeserved gift from God, that all things needed will be there.

May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace. Once again the face of God looking upon his people, cherishing them and bringing them peace. But as we talked about last week, it's not just an absence of war, it's much more. It's fullness in life, completeness, harmony, happiness. That is what God wants his people to experience.

And then the last verse is very important. **God's name is imprinted upon the people.** They become God's people. They are sealed in a Covenant Bond, a sacred relationship for the length of their lives.

With the variety of meanings of this Feast that we celebrate today, why the Book of Numbers? Why are we introduced to this wonderful blessing? It's the New Year! How could we not feel blessed by recalling and receiving God's continued Providence, his gracious favor and peace on this day, hoping that it will continue throughout the year.

And peace. As I said, popes for decades, beginning with Pope Paul VI, promoted prayer for World Peace each day. Especially this day.

And name. Recall that God's name is imprinted on his people in the Book of Numbers and throughout the entire Exodus experience. For us, Christ's name, as it is revealed in the Gospel today, is

imprinted on each one of us as a baptized person. And as the Second Reading said, in that baptism we become co-heirs with Christ. We are his brothers and sisters. And yes, on this day we call Mary our Mother.

We will conclude the liturgy today with this Aaronic Blessing and when you hear it, may it sink in just a little more. Like a soft rain in good soil.

Yes. May the Lord keep us this new year. May he be gracious to us this new year. May we find peace within ourselves and the more we find it, may that peace be given over to others, so that some small part of that wish for the world may be evident. And as we do this, let us carry it throughout the year of 2023.