

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Year A

1 January 2023



Collect

O God, who through the fruitful virginity of Blessed Mary
bestowed on the human race
the grace of eternal salvation,
grant, we pray,
that we may experience the intercession of her,
through whom we were found worthy
to receive the author of life,
our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Every five, six or eleven years, January 1st falls on a Sunday. When that happens a rich banquet of secular and religious fare is set before us. For much of the world it's the first day of the calendar year and an opportunity to embrace the promise that a New Year offers, even if fresh beginnings are put on hold while summer holidays are enjoyed.

Just over fifty years ago, the liturgical reforms of Vatican II changed the day's feast of the Circumcision of Jesus into that of the Mother of God. It remains a feast of Christ insofar as Mary's title is grounded in the undivided personhood of Jesus Christ, fully human, fully divine. It is also, courtesy of Pope Paul VI, a World Day of Peace. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means far more than the absence of war, though that's a key component. It encompasses well-being, contentment, right relationship and justice – all things to treasure and ponder in our hearts after the example of Mary.

A reading from the Book of Numbers 6:22-27

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'Say this to Aaron and his sons: "This is how you are to bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace".

This is how they are to call down my name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them.'

First Reading

It's a rare treat to hear Aaron's blessing proclaimed today. The short text appears today by way of exception. Not being allocated to any Sunday in the three-year cycle, it's only read on the exceptional occasion when the feast of Mary, the Mother of God, falls on a Sunday. And whenever that does happen, it has to compete for attention with the height of the summer holidays.

At first blush this might seem of little account. The prayer, it may be argued, is from an ancient era, it's quite brief, and is presented as the preserve of the priests of Israel. Closer examination reveals that it is timeless, beautiful, steeped in faith, and at everyone's disposal. It appears in the form of an invocation, but in the process it embodies a confession of faith in the goodness, trustworthiness and kindness of God.

In the biblical tradition, seeing God's face could be a fearful experience. Moses was revered uniquely as one who saw and spoke with God face-to-face and lived. But here the prayer for the unveiling of God's face suggests the kind of profoundly affectionate gaze that bonds child and parent. That's an image with powerful appeal. In short, here is a lovely and loving prayer not only for parents to pray over their children but for each of us to pray for one another.

This is a reading to be delivered devoutly in a spirit of prayer, faith and peace.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 66:2-3, 5, 6, 8

R. May God bless us in his mercy.

God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon earth
and all nations learn your saving help. **R.**

Let the nations be glad and exult
for you rule the world with justice.
With fairness you rule the peoples.
you guide the nations on earth. **R.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
May God still give us his blessing
till the ends of the earth revere him. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

A glance at Psalm 66/67 quickly reveals why it has been chosen for the responsorial psalm. Not only its spirit, but its very language is in harmony with the first reading. The response is a prayer for God's blessing akin to the Aaronic petitions, and words in the first stanza such as "gracious," "bless," and "light" reinforce the link.

There is a notable difference, however. The blessing that Moses entrusts to Aaron has a family feel about it. It's internal to the community of Israel. By contrast, the psalm is global in scope and has a missionary focus. God's blessing on Israel is presented as a sign that persuades all the people of the earth to sing God's praises.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Galatians 4:4–7

When the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons. The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries, 'Abba, Father,' and it is this that makes you a son, you are not a slave any more; and if God has made you son, then he has made you heir.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 2:16–21

The shepherds hurried away to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception.

Second Reading

This short extract from Paul's letter to the Galatians belies the fierce passion with which he wrote. He's so furious at the Galatians for abandoning his gospel of grace and re-assuming the obligations of the Law that he calls them "stupid" and "bewitched" (3:1). None of this is evident in today's reading. In itself it's calm, considered and positive. Paul affirms the human and Jewish identity of the Son of God. This has enabled Jesus to free Christians from being slaves of the Law and make them children who can call God, "Abba, Father".

There may be an argument for retaining the word "sons" here instead of "children" to stress that all the baptised now enjoy the privileged status that males had in the ancient world, but this may not persuade everyone. The NRSV opts for the more inclusive word. It's striking that Mary remains unnamed (as she does throughout the letters of the New Testament). The one oblique reference to her – "God sent his Son, born of a woman" – is consonant with the title bestowed on her at the Council of Ephesus in 431, "Theotokos" or "Mother of God".

The reading consists of only two sentences, but each is lengthy and complex, especially the second. Fortunately the clauses and phrases within each sentence are short. The reader's task is to give each one its proper place and weight in the construction of the argument. Judicious pausing and variation of emphasis are the key to effective proclamation of this text.

Gospel

The Acts of the Apostles implies that Luke and Paul became missionary companions for a time (cf. 16:10, 20:5-6). Not a great deal can reliably be deduced from this, but today they are of one mind on the subject of Jesus and his Jewish identity. Paul has stated that the Son of God was "born a subject of the Law". For his part, Luke records that Jesus, in accordance with the Law (Gen 17:12), was circumcised and named on "the eighth day".

Fulfilment and fidelity are twin themes pervading Luke's infancy narrative. On the one hand, God faithfully brings the age-old promise of salvation to fulfilment, and on the other, believers like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Anna and Simeon faithfully observe the Law in expectation of that fulfilment. The shepherds, finding that everything "was exactly as they had been told," burst into praise, just as Mary had done with her *Magnificat*, Zechariah with the *Benedictus*, and Simeon with the *Nunc dimittis*.

On this feast day of Mary, Luke's observation has particular resonance: "she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart". That is what good proclamation aims to do: to prompt all present to take God's word to heart.

Solemn Blessing (The Beginning of the Year)

May God, the source and origin of all blessing,
grant us grace,
pour out his blessing in abundance,
and keep us safe from harm throughout the year.

Amen.

May he give us integrity in the faith,
endurance in hope,
and perseverance in charity
with holy patience to the end.

Amen.

May he order our days and our deeds in his peace,
grant our prayers in this and in every place,
and lead us happily to eternal life.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son,+ and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Beginning of the Year, Roman Missal p 710)