

'True God and True Man — and Prince of Peace'

Numbers 6: Aaronic blessing Ps. 66: *O God be gracious and bless us*
 Gal 4: *God sent His Son, born of a woman* Luke 2: 16–21: *As for Mary she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

That Gospel passage from Luke combines two elements of today's feast-day: it is the 8th day of Christmas, so it is the day we think of Jesus being taken by Mary & Joseph for His *circumcision* as a Jewish male, and therefore also His *naming* ... and it is a celebration, therefore, also of Our Blessed Lady: Mary as 'Mother of God' ... Mother of Jesus, the Son of God.

In a way, these two emphases — the Circumcision of Jesus; and the Mary as 'Mother of God' — express together the truth of the Incarnation: that Jesus is '*true God and true man.*' His being taken to be circumcised — the sign of the covenant with Abraham that all male Jews have followed for almost 3000yrs — is a sign of Jesus's real *humanity*: He was truly born in the flesh, truly took on our human condition, and as such even let Himself be conditioned by the religious customs of His Jewish people. The 8th day was the day laid down by God to Abraham

(Gen 17) for the circumcision and naming ... Mary & Joseph took Him for this ceremony, and gave Him the glorious name of 'Jesus,' a Hebrew name which means, as St Matthew explains in his Gospel, 'Saviour': for He will save His people from their sins. The name is pretty much identical with 'Joshua' who in the Old Testament took over from Moses and led the Israelites into the Promised Land. In the 2nd reading we heard St Paul say, "When the appointed time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law ..." God allowed Himself to be inserted completely into the life and faith of the Jewish religion and nation ... He was made 'true man' in all things but sin. He did not hide from His humanity; He did not wear it like a coat that He could shake off if He didn't like it; He embraced our humanity completely, with its frailty. On that day, even as a tiny 8-day-old baby, a little of His Precious Blood was shed, to show that He had truly become one with us.

The other title of this feast approaches it from the perspective of Mary His Mother ... She is the one who has

truly given Him His human flesh — she is the one who has borne Him for nine months till His birth on earth; and yet this earthly nature does not exhaust all that He truly is. Mary being *Virgin* Mother ensures that we understand and appreciate this: that Jesus has no human father, that He is completely divine, the eternal Son of God. He did not begin to exist — as we begin to exist — when His mother conceived ... He existed from always, from all eternity, and is therefore ‘true God’. So, in accordance with this, it is acceptable to say — as we do in the Hail Mary — “Mary, Mother of God,” not in the sense that Mary in any way precedes God (of course she doesn’t, she is a human being like any of us, though sinless), but because the Son which is her Son is truly God Himself, the Son of the living God. The Church has long been giving her that exalted title; in fact vigorous disagreements were settled at the Council of Ephesus in 431AD when it was decreed that it was quite appropriate to honour Mary with that wondrous title, ‘God-bearer’ or ‘Mother of God.’ There were great celebrations in Ephesus at the time of the Council after it

had made its decision, the crowds chanting in the streets the title, *θεοτοκος* ... God-bearer.

This lovely feast, then, in the Christmas season, assures us of the truth of our faith: that Jesus is ‘Emmanuel,’ God-with-us, i.e. true God and true man. Mary protected and brought Him to birth, and she nurtured Him and cared for Him in His tiny humanity, so that He would grow to be able to begin His public life, teaching us as His plan was, and taking the sins of the world on Himself as God ... “to save His people from their sins” — to save *us* from our sins. These are great and wonderful mysteries, and like our whole belief make sense only in the vision of Almighty God as loving and kind. But in this light it *does* make sense, and makes sense of our human lives ... And in the Blessed Mother we have an advocate, an intercessor, who understands totally the challenge of human life, and the happiness of a human life given to God.

Yesterday, the great Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI left this world. In a priesthood lasting over 71 yrs, he was a

renowned teacher of the faith, and it is with his words on 1st January 2013, his last New Year's Day as Pope, that I would like to continue today. He always used his 1st January homily to draw attention to its being 'World Day of Prayer for Peace,' and so he did that day, 10 yrs ago. Here is what he said:

Although the world is sadly marked by "hotbeds of tension and conflict caused by growing instances of inequality between rich and poor, by the prevalence of a selfish and individualistic mindset which also finds expression in an unregulated financial capitalism," as well as by various forms of terrorism and crime, I am convinced that "the many different efforts at peacemaking which abound in our world testify to mankind's innate vocation to peace. In every person the desire for peace is an essential aspiration which coincides in a certain way with the desire for a full, happy and successful human life. In other words, the desire for peace corresponds to a fundamental moral principle, namely, the duty and right to an integral social and communitarian development, which is part of God's plan for mankind. Man is made for the peace which is

God's gift. All of this led me to draw inspiration for this Message from the words of Jesus Christ: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' (*Mt 5:9*)" (*Message*, 1). This beatitude "tells us that peace is both a messianic gift and the fruit of human effort ... It is peace with God through a life lived according to his will. It is interior peace with oneself, and exterior peace with our neighbours and all creation" (*ibid.*, 2, 3). Indeed, peace is the supreme good to ask as a gift from God and, at the same time, that which is to be built with our every effort.

We may ask ourselves: what is the basis, the origin, the root of peace? How can we experience that peace within ourselves, in spite of problems, darkness and anxieties? The reply is given to us by the readings of today's liturgy. The biblical texts, especially the one just read from the Gospel of Luke, ask us to contemplate the interior peace of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. During the days in which "she gave birth to her first-born son" (*Lk 2:7*), many unexpected things occurred: not only the birth of the Son but, even before, the tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, not finding room at the inn, the search for a chance place to stay for the night;

then the song of the angels and the unexpected visit of the shepherds. In all this, however, Mary remains even tempered, she does not get agitated, she is not overcome by events greater than herself; in silence she considers what happens, keeping it in her mind and heart, and pondering it calmly and serenely. This is the interior peace which we ought to have amid the sometimes tumultuous and confusing events of history, events whose meaning we often do not grasp and which disconcert us.

May the Virgin Mary, whom today we venerate with the title of Mother of God, help us to contemplate the face of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. May she sustain us and accompany us in this New Year: and may she obtain for us and for the whole world the gift of peace. Amen!



So, yes, on this 1st day of 2023 let's allow Mary, with her beautiful and sinless heart, to lead us to Jesus throughout the year ahead: may her prayers help us to make 2023 a very peaceful and blessed year, in which the name of Jesus, and her name as Mother of God, are often on our lips in prayer ... *O Mother of the Word incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.*