HOMILY FOR MARY, MOTHER OF GOD – 2017
January 1, 2017

It may seem strange to some that instead of a Mass to celebrate the New Year, we Catholics have gathered to celebrate Mary, the Mother of God. For some this may be viewed as a sign that we just aren’t in touch with what’s going on in the world. But the truth is that there is no better way to move into a new year than by remembering that God has a mother. For what this means is that God has embraced human life completely in the person of Jesus. Human life begins \textit{in} the womb of a mother, and is brought forth into the world \textit{by} a mother. So if God was going to enter fully into human life he had to have a mother.

In the gospel today we heard how eight days after the birth of her son Mary and Joseph did their parental duty and brought Jesus to the temple to be named and circumcised. Now you can’t enter more fully into human life than that! And as we enter into a New Year that has so many people feeling anxious about what the year might bring, if there is anything we need to know it is that God cares about us this much. For it means that no matter what happens in our lives during this new year, all will be well as long as we stick with the God who has gone to so much trouble to let us know that he really is with us all the way.

Of course, God has always been with and for his people. And he has made this known in many ways. We were given an example of this in our first reading today from the Book of Numbers -- though the power of this text has been diminished a bit by the way it has been translated. The text had to do with the special blessing that Aaron and his sons were to impart to the Hebrew people during their trek through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The translation we heard went like this: “The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace.”

But the words in the original text are: \textit{“Yahweh} bless you and keep you! \textit{Yahweh} let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. \textit{Yahweh} look upon you kindly and give you peace!” In other words, the original text actually uses the name of God rather than a title given to him. It was the name of God -- \textit{Yahweh} -- that the priests were to speak over the people as the most essential part of this great blessing. For by giving his name to the people, God was telling them that he was making himself available to them.

This is the way it works, isn’t it? If you want to make yourself available to someone, you give them your name. If you don’t want to make yourself available to someone, you don’t give them your name. Right? I mean, have you ever refrained from telling someone your name on the phone, on the Internet, or at some social function because you didn’t want that person to be able to track you down? Giving someone our name is an open invitation for that person to connect with us again. And this is what makes the blessing we find in our
reading from Numbers so amazing – God instructs the priests to speak his name in blessing their people. For there could be no clearer sign that God really wanted to be a part of their lives than this.

But then the problem has never been that God hasn’t wanted to be close to his people. Rather, it is that people keep pushing God away. I mean, even though God was the one who had given his name to his people to be used, after a time, people concluded that God’s name was too sacred to pronounce. So whenever they came to the name Yahweh in a sacred text they read Lord instead. And let’s face it – it’s a lot harder to have an intimate connection with someone you address as your master than it is with someone you call by name.

But God has never been satisfied with his people’s tendency to distance themselves from him, even for the sake of piety. This was made clear in our reading from Galatians where God even goes beyond the giving of his name to establish a closeness with his people. There Paul said that through Christ, God has adopted us all as his children, so that like Jesus, we are able to call him Abba, Father. Now, in Jesus’ day, Abba was a familiar, though respectful, term for one’s father -- somewhat akin to our calling our father dad. In fact, Jesus himself told us that when we pray we are to speak to God as our heavenly Abba – as our heavenly dad. And how could God’s desire to share life with us be expressed any more clearly than this?

A couple weeks ago I watched a movie entitled Angel in the House. It’s a delightful movie and family friendly. In it a couple, named Alec and Zooey, decided to look into adopting because they were having trouble conceiving a child. But while Zooey knew that this was something she really wanted to do, Alec really wasn’t fully committed to the idea. As the story goes, they ended up with a child more quickly than they expected. And Zooey embraced this child named Eli as her own very quickly, telling him that he could call her mom. But Alec wasn’t ready for this. He told Eli to call him Alec. However, as the story moves along, their relationship deepens until it comes to the point where Alec says to Eli, “You can call me dad if you like.” And Eli was delighted.

Well, through Jesus God says to us, “You can call me dad, if you like.” And it’s obvious that God would like this very much because it speaks of a relationship that is warm and intimate. As I see it, that’s what this feast of Mary, the Mother of God is all about. There is a beautiful depiction of this in the stained glass window in the south confessional. (Don’t worry, I won’t ask for a show of hands of those who have seen it! But it truly is worth seeing, whether you are going to confession or not.) The window shows Mary holding Jesus close to her in a warm embrace. But what is unique about this particular depiction of Madonna and child is that the infant Jesus is also holding on to Mary in a warm embrace.
The loving embrace is mutual. And this is the message that is at the heart of this feast – God embraces humankind as a child embraces his mother and as a mother embraces her child.

This feast of Mary, Mother of God is just one of the many ways the Church has of communicating this desire of God to share life with us – to live with us in love and to bless us. And it is important that we take this to heart. We live in a world that seems constantly to be pushing people toward self-centeredness, fear, and exclusion – toward things that breed hatred, suspicion, and callousness. Of course, none of this makes for a better world.

It doesn’t make life better for those who are caught up in this web of darkness, and it certainly doesn’t make life better for those who are wounded by their hateful words and actions.

What the Church proclaims today is that we are given a healing remedy for this in this feast of Mary, Mother of God. In the loving embrace of the divine and the human – mother Mary and the infant Jesus -- we catch a glimpse of something that is beautiful, life giving, and truly good. The God who gives us his name, the God who invites us to call him Abba, the God who reaches out to us in love is great enough to hold all the people of our world together in his divine embrace – if only we will accept his gracious invitation. And we are called to help the people of our world see this by what we say and do.

Fr. Rod Damico

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