

Mary Mother of God – A Cycle

January 1, 2017

Happy New Year, everyone. I always wonder how it is that today starts the new year and not some other day? Different cultures celebrate the new year on other dates during the year. The Jews celebrated their new year at the beginning of October with Rosh Hashanah. The Chinese will be celebrating on January 23. The Church celebrates its new year on the first Sunday of Advent. Our celebrating on January 1 goes back to 153 BC and it began in Rome. The Romans chose January 1 because that was when Roman councils took office. They celebrated with wild parties. Eventually, early Christians made January 1 a day of penance as a reaction to the wild and immoral celebration of the Romans. Liturgically, today is a holyday, not because it's New Year's, but because it's the octave of Christmas and a solemn feast honoring Mary as the Mother of God.

Also in recent years, the Holy Father has asked us to pray for peace as we begin a new year. The familiar blessing we prayed for in our first reading asks for peace. I mention all these things because I want to stress that it's not **just** New Year's Day we are celebrating. I'm sure most of us have special prayers we would want God to answer or special reasons to tell God we are grateful. I pray on this day that the things we are grateful for are far more numerous than the issues that burden us.

So now we declare that we are in a New Year because the Roman councils took office on this day over 2000 years ago. We wonder how new it will be. Will it be more peaceful; will we follow Christ more faithfully; will the homeless and the poor be better served or better helped. We might take a clue from Mary, the mother of God, as to how to approach this year. St. Luke tells us Mary kept all the things that were happening in her mind and heart, and she reflected on them. With Mary we can reflect on God's mysterious love in our life, which is what we do each time we are at Mass.

Who knows, in our reflections we may generate one or two New Year's resolutions. New Year's Resolutions are good if we keep them. Instead of looking to make some beneficial changes in the way we live or to make the world a better place, a lot of us think that what has to change are the people around us. Our government is a good example; i.e., we might claim we need more laws or less laws or different laws.

In light of the fact that this past year was saturated with politics, I thought I would share some political wisdom with you. Please do not think I am targeting any specific party or politician. You can do that for yourself. So here is my political wisdom for 2017:

Will Rogers once said, "If we got one-tenth of what was promised to us in political speeches, there wouldn't be any inducement to go to heaven."

In 1952, Adlai Stevenson said "I offer my opponents a bargain: if they will stop telling lies about us, I will stop telling the truth about them."

“Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even where there is no river” was Nikita Khrushchev’s comment.

Other comments from unknown authors: “Why pay money to have your family tree traced; go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.”

Three more: “The problem with political jokes is they get elected.”

“Instead of giving a politician the keys to the city, it might be better to change the locks.”

“A politician is a person who will lay down *your* life for the country.”

Governmental laws and political parties greatly affect our nation and our lives. Lets not forget, though, that many times if we want our life to be better, the only person who can make it better is ourselves.

I would like to end with a word about **the** most important thing any of us can do this coming year. Keep God first in your life. If you keep God first, everything in your life will fit together better. Remember Adam and Eve. As long as they obeyed God, they were in paradise. When they decided to ignore what God commanded them, they lost everything. Prayer helps us keep a healthy perspective on all of life. Without prayer our perspective on the various elements in our life gets distorted.

Keeping God first means keeping the Commandments, going to Mass, taking some time to pray. A sign outside of a church asked: “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?”

Keep God first and it will be a better year for you; that is not to say if you follow God more faithfully, it will be a time when all your days are problem free, but it will be better than if you try to pass your days without seeking God’s help. Amen.

Feast of the Epiphany

January 8, 2017

INTRODUCTION: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians 587 years before Christ. The Jews who were not killed by the Babylonians were taken to Babylon as exiles. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. What the Jews returned to was still in shambles just as when it had been destroyed 50 years earlier. Rebuilding was extremely difficult. Today’s prophet, writing about 500 years before Christ, tries to encourage the people and assure them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming the center of spirituality and light for all the world. People would come from everywhere to visit Jerusalem and to be nourished by the spiritual light and life radiating from it. St. Matthew sees this vision fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the coming of the magi. When you hear the last few lines of today’s first reading, you will understand why it was chosen for today’s feast of the Epiphany.

HOMILY: In St. Luke's gospel on Christmas, we heard about angels announcing to shepherds in the vicinity that the messiah had been born and how they could find him. Today we turn to St. Matthew who tells us about a star that announces to some travelers from a distant land, probably wealthy ones, that a great king had been born. These visitors might have been magicians, they could have been Persian priests of the Zoroastrian religion, or they could have been kings. Most probably, however, they were astrologers - people who studied the stars to seek information about the present or the future. We might assume that it was a couple of years after Jesus' birth when they finally showed up in Jerusalem. St. Matthew tells us the Holy Family lived in a house by the time of their arrival, and when Herod wanted to find the child, he looked for boys two years of age or younger. When these foreigners found him, they did honor to Jesus by lying flat on the ground – anticipating St. Paul's letter to the Philippians: "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." (*Phil. 2, 10-11*)

Matthew doesn't tell us how many visitors there were. He only tells us about the three different gifts they brought. Golden objects or works of art always makes an appropriate gift for a king. Frankincense was a perfumed incense used only in the sanctuary of the Temple; i.e., it was used only to honor God. Myrrh was a fragrant oil used by the king or by the high priest when he consecrated the arc of the covenant, the altar, and all the objects that were used in their worship of God.

Some scholars believe the star was Halley's Comet, others suspect it was a supernova or that Jupiter and Saturn were seen in conjunction with one another. Perhaps the star was the fulfillment of a pagan prophet, Balaam, who lived 1300 years before Christ. He prophesized that "a star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." (*Num 24, 17*) A star was also mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Whatever this mysterious star was, the Christmas star identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

Before I conclude, I wish to reflect on another difference between Matthew and Luke. Luke's account of Jesus' birth contains no negative element; when Luke tells us there was no room in the inn, it was not an expression of hostility, it was simply because every niche and corner was full. In Luke, angels were singing and announcing good news while the shepherds were rejoicing. There was peace and joy all around.

In Matthew, however, we have Gentile strangers looking for Jesus to honor him while Herod, the King of the Jews is full of murderous jealousy and making plans to kill him. This state of affairs seems to represent the future rejection of Jesus by his own people and the acceptance of the gospel by Gentiles. For each of us, this contrast between Luke and Matthew can serve to symbolize the internal struggle between that part of ourselves which willingly and joyfully accepts Jesus as our brother and our savior and that opposite side of ourselves which resents his right to tell us how to worship and how we are to live. We cannot condemn Herod until we have acknowledged the Herod in ourselves.

INTRODUCTION: (*Is 49,3.5-6; I Cor. 1,1-3; Jn. 1,29-34*) The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. After about four weeks, the Church year moves into the Christmas season and then into the season of the Epiphany. Epiphany celebrates more than the coming of the magi. It also celebrates the Baptism of Jesus and his first miracle: changing water into wine at Cana.

This past week, on Monday, we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord and that was the end of the Christmas/Epiphany season. The Christmas tree disappeared and everything was back to normal for a few weeks. What we call "back to normal," the Church calls "ordinary time." Ordinary time focuses on what Jesus said and did during the time of his public ministry. Except for Lent, Passiontide, Easter and Pentecost, ordinary time covers all the rest of the year. Ordinary time is interrupted in the spring by Lent, Passion time, Easter and Pentecost, because Jesus was put to death in the spring during the Jewish feast of Passover, so that's why ordinary time is interrupted for several weeks in the spring.

So here we are, celebrating the second Sunday of ordinary time as Jesus begins his public ministry. At this point in his ministry, he is busy choosing those who would be his disciples, those who would be with him and learn from him. We get an impression that for a little while Jesus worked with John the Baptist, and in today's gospel John is suggesting that some of his own disciples get to know Jesus better.

Our first reading today is a short passage that comes from a prophet who lived about 500 years before Christ. God had marked this anonymous person as his servant who would be a light to the nations and who would reveal God's saving love to the ends of the earth. Through many signs and wonders, John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples would gradually come to know that Jesus was this extra special servant of God that Isaiah is speaking of.

HOMILY: In Fr. Ray Brown's book on St. John's Gospel, there are 14 pages of commentary on today's short gospel passage. It would take us the rest of the hour and then some to discuss 14 pages of interpretation, but I have reduced my homily to three ideas of what the gospel means by the term "Lamb of God." It is an important concept seeing as it is at a very important part of the Mass when we address Jesus as "Lamb of God."

The first understanding of the term is the apocalyptic "Lamb of God." When the Jews thought of the end of the world and the final judgment, they thought of a conquering lamb with superhuman powers who would destroy all evil powers in the world, and this lamb would be the leader of God's people. An image of the lamb as described in our Book of Revelation is on the front of our high altar.

Second, in today's Reading from Isaiah, the Lamb of God represents the Suffering Servant. In Aramaic, the word for lamb (talya) also is the word for servant. Isaiah says of the servant: "he opened not his mouth, like a sheep that is led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearers." There is a lot of evidence to connect the concepts together.

The third connection is between the Lamb of God and the paschal lamb. In Christian thought, the Lamb takes away the sin of the world by his death. The letter of St. Peter assures Christians that "they have been emancipated with precious blood, as of an unblemished and spotless lamb, namely the blood of Christ."

There you are - three very brief images of what the "Lamb of God" could mean. Is the Lamb of God the powerful and victorious one who destroys all evil, or the suffering servant who God has chosen to be a light to the nations that his salvation may reach to the ends of the earth, or is he the paschal sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world? Or can we claim him to be all of these? Scholars will argue for their favorite interpretation. You have permission to choose one or to choose all that you think fits best.

Our gospel illustrates how John the Baptist knew some things about Jesus, but there was so much more he had to learn. We too are like that in our knowledge of Jesus. There is always more to learn. Sometimes people have a hard time understanding why Jesus was baptized by John. There's no problem at all when we realize, as the Baptist says, the whole purpose of the Baptist's baptism consisted in revealing to Israel the Messiah who was to come. That's what the baptism of the Baptist did for Jesus; it revealed he was the Messiah who was to come and who would baptize with the Spirit.

Many people think of baptism as a sacrament that once you receive it, you can forget about it. But you can't. It will change your life forever. May Jesus continue to reveal himself to each of us so that, as we come to know him more intimately, we might, in our daily lives, reveal him to others. Amen.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

January 22, 2017

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 8,23-9,3; I Corinthians 1,10-13.17; Matthew 4,12-23*) In 722 BC the Assyrians, those living in the northern part of Iraq, attacked Galilee and destroyed it. Today we hear Isaiah promising God's blessings would once again shine on Galilee. The great light they would see would be cast by the coming of the Son of God.

HOMILY: Galilee suffered a fatal blow in 722 BC when the Assyrians attacked them. From then on, they struggled to survive as other powerful nations conquered the area - the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee; he was the light that brightened up a depressed land. I chose to read the short form of today's gospel because we have a video we want to show you at the end of Mass. If you were to continue reading today's gospel, you would read about Jesus

gathering together his apostles who would help him spread the light he came to bring. Those who have followed Jesus throughout the past 2000 years have found themselves not only being enlightened by Christ, but also being called to help bring his light to others.

The Catholic Ministries Appeal that you are hearing about today hopes to help spread Christ's light. The diocese has been making this appeal for 40 years. It helps support the seminary and vocations, Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services, retired diocesan priests, and chaplains who serve our universities, hospitals and prisons. These are all ministries that no one parish alone could support, but these ministries can function when the whole diocese is supporting them. Our goal for St. Boniface for the CMA is \$ 23,000. I think it's a reasonable figure considering we received slightly more than that last year.

Unfortunately, the timing for the CMA conflicts with our usual St. Vincent de Paul 5th Sunday appeal next week. If contributing to the parish, to the SVDP, and pledging something for the CMA all on the same Sunday is too much, just hold back on one or the other collections and make up for it during February. There are no special collections scheduled during February except for the usual collection for parish support. If you hold back on one or the other appeal, be sure you use an envelope that identifies where your donation is to go. Thank you for your patience with all of this.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

January 29, 2017

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading is from the prophet Zephaniah who lived during a time of colossal change and shifts of world power. Let me give you some hint of what was happening. Assyria, who demolished the northern kingdom of Israel, was crumbling and Babylon was swiftly asserting its strength and would soon destroy Assyria. King Manasseh had ruled the southern kingdom of Israel for 50 years. He was a descendant of King David and was pledged to worship Yahweh, the one God of Israel. Instead, he brought into the Temple pagan worship, human sacrifice and sacred prostitution. King Manasseh had died and his son, Amon, was assassinated after two years. So Manasseh's second son, Josiah, ascended the throne at the age of eight. Josiah faithfully worshipped Yahweh and led a reform that brought people back to the God of Israel. As is obvious, it was a time of great upheaval during the time of Zephaniah. Today's passage is an assurance from God that he will bless the humble and the lowly who take refuge in him. It sets us up for the beatitudes where God promises he will bless those who are suffering or in pain and who are faithful to him.

HOMILY: I am going to preach a brief homily on today's gospel and then I will say a little more about the Catholic Ministries Appeal. First the homily.

On the whole, we want to notice two words we hear over and over again in today's gospel: "are" and "will." Each beatitude begins in the present tense: "blessed are..." and moves to the future tense: "for they will..." We all know people who are poor or who suffer, people who are caring and forgiving and who try to spread peace, people who

are chaste, and people who suffer injustice. These people try to live the way the gospel teaches us. Sometimes they may feel discouraged, but they keep trying. Don't you know people like that? These people might be us at times.

Jesus came to announce God's kingdom of peace and joy and eternal life. He introduced it by his teachings (such as the beatitudes) and his miracles and his exorcisms. Jesus announced that the kingdom is coming but has not yet fully arrived. It will be too awesome to describe. In the beatitudes he is giving us hope for a better life and a much brighter future. If we are suffering in this life, following Jesus' teachings can bring us a great deal of support, but Jesus wants us to know that our life in eternity will be unbelievably wonderful.

Now for the Catholic Ministries Appeal. The various ministries this appeal supports do reach out to those who suffer or are in pain and to help people make a better life for themselves. You know the list of charities it supports: Catholic Charities and Social Services, St. Rita's School for the deaf. It provides chaplains for people in college, hospitals and in prison; it helps form priests, deacons (like Jerry Yetter who is such a great help) and lay ministers through its various programs. It provides pension and support for priests who are sick or retired. All the money from this appeal will go only to ministries in this Archdiocese. I want to say a little more about priests' retirement. 20% of this appeal goes toward priest retirement. As you may know, diocesan priests are paid a salary, but after they retire they rely on their pension or their 401 K. Many of them require additional medical care, like Fr. Stricker right now. At present there are - about 230 diocesan priests in the archdiocese, but 80 of them are retired. When I was ordained there were assistants in most parishes. Elder High School had almost all priests as teachers. It took almost 20 years after ordination before a young priest became a pastor. Not anymore. If you don't want to give anything to this appeal, might I ask you to give a few dollars to help with retired priests. I may need it someday. Don't worry that we might go over our goal. Half the excess will come back to the parish.

I want to remind you of what I said last week: if it is overwhelming to respond to all three appeals today, just hold back on one or two of them and make it up during February. An example of what I mean is this: donate for parish needs in the Church envelope, and use the Vincent de Paul envelope to help the poor as usual. Then make a pledge for the Catholic Ministries Appeal and pay it off throughout the rest of the year. I don't believe there are any special collections during February, so you could carry some of these over into February. Just be sure to use an envelope so we will know how to direct your donation.

Everyone should have received an envelope like this in the mail. If you have already made your pledge, or are not likely to make a pledge, I would suggest you just sit back and relax. If you are willing to make a pledge now or later on in the month, then you might need an envelope and a pencil (which should be somewhere in a pew near you). Just put your name on the front and check off one of the boxes. Then on the inside of the envelope in the lower left corner is a place for your name and address - and be sure you put in our name, St. Boniface, and the city, Cincinnati, since there is a St. Boniface

in Piqua. As you can see on the right side, you can pay your pledge off monthly for 10 months. If you are paying by check – write the check out to Catholic Ministries Appeal. The top part of the envelope speaks for itself – especially don't miss the possibility of getting a matching gift. Thank you for your patience.