

Mary Mother of God – C Cycle

January 1, 2016

"God sent his son, born of a woman."

The chiming of the Angelus bell is a long and holy tradition in the life of the Church. At six in the morning, twelve noon and six in the evening, across the world church and monastery bells ring out the ancient chime, and people pause in the midst of their daily activities to murmur the ancient prayer: "The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary..." Christian people stop to recall the greatest event in the history of time, that God became man in Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary.

In the ancient Christian land of Ireland, this tradition was taken up in the age of modern communications by radio, and then by television. For many years now, and still to this day, at midday and in the evening, the media pauses its programs to transmit the Angelus chimes across the fields of Ireland, and in many homes, people stop their busy lives and join in the silent prayer.

In very recent times, in this age of secularism, pluralism and the Celtic tiger economy, voices have been raised to suggest alteration or even abolition of this Christian practice. So far those voices have not been a majority, and the "prayer pause" has survived. Some good alterations have been introduced, however, in the television transmission. Where, at one time, the screen revealed an icon of the Mother and Child to view during the chimes, in recent times a series of overlapping images have been introduced, showing tranquil scenes of Irish life, of lake and land, farm and field, terrace and town: and the faces of Irish people, young and old, looking up from their work, looking inward and upward.

This holy moment is truly sacred and truly precious. It takes us to another level of life, to a stillness and a wonder at it all. It is a moment not only for saying the prayer, but even for not saying the prayer. It is a moment to remember the faces of loved ones, alive or gone before us, near or far away. To recall those faces and to pray for all those lovely people. It is a time, most of all, to place ourselves before the face of God, and to ask him to reveal his face to us, to let his face shine on us.

Gospel Teaching

At the beginning of Israel's story, in the Book of Numbers, such a wish and such a prayer is made into a blessing for the people. As the people in the desert are formed into a nation under God, and prepare to enter the Promised Land, the priests are instructed on how to call the blessing of God down upon the people. It is the blessing of God's face. The face is our entry point to the world, and also the world's entry point into our inner being. All healthy meetings are meetings face to face. All healthy attitudes involve a mutual seeing, not a staring at others nor a sneaking glimpse. All honest encounter is an encounter of faces. The spirit of the person, the soul, is communicated through the open face. It is through the face we communicate warmth and affection to others, or withhold them as the case may be. The human smile is the warmest expression of our genuine delight in others, and its warmth and brightness can be felt by the recipient. That is why we plead with God to smile upon us. It is the greatest blessing on earth.

Application

In Jesus, born of Mary, God's ancient promise and blessing is fulfilled. God has revealed his face to us in Mary's child, born at the appointed time. Mary pondered these great mysteries in her heart. What great things the Lord had done in her life, and what privileges she had been

given, to be called "mother of God." All generations now have called her blessed, and so do we on this day, at the opening of the year.

Mary is mother of God. And we are children of God. We should never forget it. Not now. Not ever. Let the Angelus bell continue to chime and to ring out the joyous news. Happy New Year, everyone! Yes, and more. The blessing of God upon you--the blessing that comes to us in God's son, born of Mary, and whose name is Jesus.

Summary

1. The Angelus--a tradition in Church and in Irish life.
2. Recalling faces--especially the face of God.
3. Israel's ancient blessing--the smile of God.
4. The blessing of the human face.
5. God's face is seen in Jesus, Mary's Son.

ACTION PLAN

1. Thank Jesus for your mother here on earth and the gift of His mother, Mary.
2. One day this week take a "prayer pause" and say a special prayer to Mary.
3. Pray for all family members, living and dead.

Feast of the Epiphany January 6, 2016

INTRODUCTION: *Isaiah 60, 1-6; Ephesians 3, 2-3a; Matthew 2, 1-12.* Five hundred eighty-seven years before Christ, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (a people who lived in modern day Iraq). Most of the Jews who had not been killed when the Babylonians invaded Israel were taken to Babylon as exiles and slaves. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. It's hard to imagine the task that the Jewish people faced as they tried to rebuild their homes, their Temple, their farms after the Babylonians destroyed everything 50 years earlier. The prophet in today's first reading tries to encourage God's people and assure them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming a light for the whole world. His vision is that the Jews would no longer be the only people to learn about God and to worship God, but people would come from all nations to visit Jerusalem to be nourished by God's word and to worship at God's holy temple. St. Matthew, in today's gospel, sees the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus as the fulfillment of the words of the prophet.

HOMILY: The word Epiphany comes from the Greek and in general means an "appearing" or an "appearance." Generally it referred to a divine appearance. Our gospels for the next three weeks will carry this theme. Let me explain. At his birth Jesus made his appearance through the intense brightness of an unusual star. Micah, the prophet, who lived over 700 years before Christ, foretold the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but it was left to a few pagan wise men to search for him and honor him. Next Sunday, we hear about the baptism of Jesus, and it is

through a voice from heaven and the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove who revealed Jesus as God's beloved Son. The third time Jesus is revealed is at the wedding feast of Cana where he performs his first miracle which helped his disciples to begin to believe in him.

The focus on all three of these gospels is on Jesus' being revealed as divine. But what good will it bring to anyone whose mind and heart is closed to such an appearance or a revelation of God's presence. In today's gospel, it was magi who recognized that someone great had been born and they believed the word of the prophet that told where he could be found. The others (except for King Herod) were unmoved about the heavenly sign and the message the prophet revealed. His appearance meant nothing to them. It did mean something to Herod – it meant he could be replaced by someone else which did not please Herod at all. I guess he must have thought he was destined to be a king forever. As it turned out, the king who would reign forever was still a baby or a toddler when the Great Herod died suddenly during a public function.

So this leads us to ask ourselves what am I looking for? If God is making himself known to me, am I seeking to know him. Herod was always looking for anyone who might be a threat to his power, and if he even suspected someone, they would be executed. The chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people, who had the answer as to where the Messiah was to be born, could not bother searching for him. They had their prayers to say, their sacrifices to offer, their scriptures to study. They had important jobs to finish up so they could go home for their evening meal. They didn't have a couple of hours to travel seven miles down the road to Bethlehem to find their newborn king. The rest of Jerusalem who learned about the king of the Jews from the magi, well, they were busy too. Just a few dirty, smelly shepherds dropped in every now and then.

Surprisingly magi come looking for him. The magi probably came from Persia (about 1000 miles from Jerusalem). They were the scholars of that day, seeking to learn all they could about the world, about the stars, about people and about God. And what did they find: a mother with a baby or small child. Yet, in their wisdom, they could see beyond a little child, they could see through the sign God had given them and through the word of the prophet this child was destined to do great things.

Isn't that somewhat like us today when we come to Mass. We gather in prayer, we sing a few songs, we listen to God's word and we receive a small wafer and a sip from a cup and once again Jesus is making himself known to us. We don't see visions or fireworks. Yet we believe, that with his grace, great things are waiting for us down the road, greater than we can imagine right now. We came here today to ask Jesus to make himself known to us as we offer him our love and our praise and our treasure.

Baptism of the Lord – C Cycle **January 10, 2016**

INTRODUCTION (*Isaiah 42, 1-4, 6-7; Acts 10, 34-38; Luke 3, 15-16, 21-22*)

Surely there were many people who pleased God greatly during the Old Testament period, people such as Abraham, Moses, the prophets. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, however, God speaks of someone as his servant with whom he is especially well-pleased. God does not identify this servant, yet it takes four lengthy passages, known as the servant songs, to describe the faithful and excellent service of this servant of God. One wonders whether the four passages refer to someone who was alive at the time of the prophet, but what is amazing is that, although they were written 500 years before Jesus was born, they describe Jesus perfectly. Today's first reading is part of the first servant song. It has been chosen as today's

first reading because we hear echoes of it at Jesus' baptism as God voices his approval of Jesus, saying to him: "you are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

HOMILY: Although the day after Christmas is the end of the Christmas season for many people, the Church's liturgical year extends the Christmas-Epiphany season to the Baptism of our Lord. Thus our crib is still in church. Here is the connection between the Christmas crib and the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. Remember "epiphany" means appearance or manifestation. Last Sunday we celebrated God manifesting his Son to the Gentiles, that is, to all nations by the visit of the magi. Today we celebrate God manifesting Jesus to us as his beloved Son at his baptism and at the beginning of his public ministry.

Some people think that baptism originated with John the Baptist, but we now know that baptism was practiced before John's time by the Essenes who are believed to be responsible for creating and preserving the Dead Sea scrolls. When John baptized a person in the river, in a symbolic sense he was asking them to clean up their act, that is, to repent their sins, to prepare themselves to meet their Messiah and Savior. John's baptism was a symbol of repentance and a commitment to follow God's laws so that they might share in God's kingdom which would soon be revealed by Jesus. When Jesus came to be baptized, it was not an expression of repentance on his part because Jesus was without sin. Rather Jesus' baptism expressed his perfect union with a sinful humanity (he was human in every way except sin as St. Paul tells us) and his baptism expressed his support and solidarity with the message of John the Baptist. God himself used the occasion to reveal the divinity of Christ upon whom God's Spirit came to rest.

John's baptism was only a symbol. It did nothing to make a person change. Jesus, however, gave us a baptism that is a great deal more than a symbol; it is a sacrament and it has the power to truly make us clean and to fill us with new life. When we are baptized we are truly born again, we are freed of all sin, and we actually become God's children because we share his life. Every *Our Father* we say reminds us of this - we have been made children of God. Every time we bless ourselves with holy water as we enter church, we are reminded that we have been cleansed of our sins and the life giving water that comes from the Spirit has been poured into our hearts. I think Jesus' baptism was also meant to teach us by example how important baptism is for us - for through it eternal life is opened up to us. The importance of baptism is stressed also in a conversation Jesus had with the Pharisee, Nicodemus, when he said: "unless a person be born again (or born from above) he or she cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven."

We cannot conclude without stressing one last meaning Jesus' baptism has for us. The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist was at the beginning of Jesus' saving work. So in baptism we are called to participate in Jesus' work of salvation in whatever way we can and to the extent that our talents allow us. Certainly this participation includes prayer for ourselves and for others. It surely means being a loving spouse, parent, grandparent, sibling or friend. It may mean anything from being alert to doing simple acts of kindness to dedicating our whole lives to helping others. Only we can sense what God is calling us to do as his sons and daughters. Just remember, when we were baptized, God said to each of us: "you are my beloved son or daughter; with you I am well pleased." May we live up to the dignity that Jesus allows us to share with him. Amen.

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time – C cycle January 17, 2016

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 62, 1-5; I Corinthians 12, 4-11; John 2, 1-11*) In our first reading the prophet is speaking to God's people who are returning from their 50 years of exile in Babylon. Their return resulted from the Persians (think of Iran) conquering the Babylonians (think of Iraq) and allowing the Jews to go back to their home in Israel. During those 50 years in exile, Jerusalem lay in ruins. God's people were now facing the grueling task of rebuilding their Temple, their homes, their cities and their farms. The important part of today's first reading for us is the image of Israel as God's spouse. This wedding image (symbolizing the love God has for his people) prepares the way for the gospel account of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana.

HOMILY: My message will be brief today. Most everyone here has received or will receive a letter from the Archbishop asking your support for the Catholic Ministries Appeal (CMA). I can assume some people are thinking: "What, another appeal?" This is not like last year's major campaign. The CMA is the same appeal that has been taking place in the early part of the year for the past 40 years. Formerly it was called the Archbishop's Annual Fund Drive (which is a name I'm sure you remember). We're having this appeal because of various needs in our Archdiocese and because our Lord, whom we follow, has shown us that it is important to help people in need when we are able. We see Jesus doing this in our gospel today. His first miracle was saving a couple who got married from extreme embarrassment. In that culture a wedding was a celebration of the entire village and it typically lasted for a week. It would have been a bad omen if the celebration had to end half way thru the week. Did you notice the gospel doesn't tell us anything about how Jesus did what he did, but the main focus is on the abundance that Jesus provided - six stone water jars each holding 20 to 30 gallons. The gospel stresses it wasn't just cheap wine but wine of the finest vintage. It was a sign John tells us, a sign of the many blessings he came to give. He was actually about to change the whole world for those who were ready to trust his message. If we want to follow him, the assumption is that we will try to learn from him and imitate him to the extent that we can. Our goal this year for the CMA is practically the same as last year: \$20,170. I want you to know this appeal has my full support. The ministries it supports are ministries that no single parish on its own could provide, ministries that need support from the entire Archdiocese. The various ministries it supports are illustrated in a video I want to show you which will take less than 6 minutes. If you have already brought your contribution with you, just put it in the collection basket as usual. Otherwise, I ask you to bring your contribution next Sunday. No matter how large or small it may be, we need everyone's help. So now we'll have the video.

Third Sunday – Ordinary Time – C cycle January 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION – After 50 years as exiles in Babylon, many of the Jews became quite comfortable there. They only knew stories about Israel, stories about how the land of Israel was destroyed by the Babylonians. There were probably just a few who were over 50 years old and who had experienced the Babylonian conquest. So lots of the younger Jews had known Babylon as their only home and they intended to stay living there even though the king of Persia, who now ruled the entire area, told the Jews they could return to Israel. Today's first reading brings us back to about the year 450 B.C., 100 years after the king of Persia had released the Jews from their captivity. A Jew named Nehemiah was one of those Jews who chose to keep living in Babylon. Nehemiah had an important position as a servant to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. Artaxerxes was aware of the difficulties facing the Jews in trying to

rebuild their nation. So the king asked Nehemiah to return to Israel as governor of that land. After arriving in Israel, Nehemiah focused all his efforts on what was most important if they were ever to succeed, their faith in God. In today's first reading Nehemiah called for a general assembly of the people and he delegated the priest-scribe, Ezra, to read God's word to them. As a scribe, Ezra would have been one of the few people who knew how to read and write. Being a priest, he could publicly expound on the meaning of the Scriptures. So Ezra read God's word to the people and interpreted it for them. The reading was most probably from the first five books of the Bible. Notice how the people actively responded to God's word. This passage from Old Testament history leads us to the gospel where Jesus reads God's word to his former neighbors in Nazareth in today's gospel. The response Jesus gets is not at all positive as we shall see.

HOMILY – Since we will be hearing a lot from Luke's gospel this year, our liturgy reminds us of why Luke wrote his gospel and the care he had taken to compose it accurately. After this introduction to his gospel, we skip over the accounts of Jesus' birth, his baptism, his 40 days in the wilderness and his temptations and we come to the start of his public ministry.

Although Jesus had already been busy teaching and healing, Luke wants to start telling us about Jesus' public ministry with the account of his visit to his home town: Nazareth. This is an important part of Luke's gospel because it foreshadows the entire ministry of Jesus. His visit to his relatives and friends in Nazareth started favorably but ended with the people's rejection of Jesus as we will hear next week.

Today, however, as Jesus begins his ministry, he announces he had been anointed by the Spirit of God (he is the anointed one – which in Greek is *Christos*) and as we continue to listen to Luke's account, we learn that Jesus' ministry is guided by that same Spirit. Jesus thus fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah and in fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus reveals the saving love of God.

Our readings are all quite lengthy today, and as today is the day for us to make our commitment to the Catholic Ministries Appeal –we should take a couple of minutes for that. So, if you brought your contribution envelope and it needs to be filled out just do so. Make sure your name and our parish's name is on it, seal it and drop it in the regular collection. Notice there is a place for your name inside the envelope and on the front. If you forgot to bring your envelope, or you didn't receive one in the mail there are extra ones in the pews. If you are not prepared to make a donation or commitment today, just bring it next week. If there are not any extra envelopes in the pews, just raise your hand and one of the ushers will bring one to you. Just don't forget your name and the parish name.

St. Paul tells us today that we all form one body in Christ. Just as all the parts of our bodies depend on one another, so in the body of Christ we have to depend on one another. The CMA is one good way we can, both materially and spiritually, help one another in our Archdiocese. Thank you for your patience and for whatever you can do to share some of your blessings.

Fourth Sunday – Ordinary Time January 31, 2016

INTRODUCTION (*Jeremiah 1,4-5.17-19; I Cor. 12,31-13,13; Lk 4, 21-30*)

Our gospel last week ended with Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth. Last week's gospel told us Jesus went to the synagogue service on the Sabbath and was invited to do a reading from the Scriptures and he chose a passage from the prophet Isaiah to read and comment on.

Today's gospel continues to tell us about that visit. His relatives, friends and former neighbors responded favorably to his message, but their response quickly turned into hostility. Our first reading, as usual, prepares us for the gospel. Jeremiah the prophet heard God's call to preach, a job that God warned him would lead to suffering and rejection.

HOMILY Today's gospel reminds me somewhat of Rodney Dangerfield. He was famous for the expression: "I don't get no respect." He said: "when I was young, all I knew was rejection. My yo-yo, it never came back... "I asked my old man if I could go ice skating on the lake. He told me, 'wait till it gets warmer.'" "Once when I was lost I saw a policeman and asked him to help me find my parents. I said to him, 'Do you think we'll ever find them?'" the policeman said, 'I don't know kid. There are so many places they could hide.'" He said once in a swimming pool he was drowning. He screamed for help and the lifeguard told him to hold it down. *(from Dynamic Preaching, January – March 2016, pg 28)*

I imagine Jesus was feeling the same way when he went to visit relatives, friends and former neighbors for the first time after he began his ministry of preaching and healing. We hear Jesus in today's gospel quoting the proverb: "no prophet is accepted in his own native place." Jesus had just told his listeners that God's Spirit had anointed him; in other words, he spoke for God, he spoke as a prophet. At the end of his time in Nazareth, he received not only no respect from the people who had known him most all of his life, they were ready to put him to death.

Even though Jesus had already been preaching and healing in Capernaum, St. Luke uses this event to begin telling us about Jesus' public ministry. He does so because "this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church." *(Fred Craddock: Luke, Interpretation, pg 61)* So let us look at our gospel more closely.

It is clear to us from the passage who Jesus is, what he came to do, and the ultimate response to his ministry by his own chosen people with whom he lived and worked. What is not clear is how this gathering of his relations, friends and former neighbors could have moved so quickly from a favorable response to him to the place where they wanted to put him to death.

For a long time, I had thought that those who knew him throughout his years at Nazareth rejected him because they had known him as a person who belonged to the working class (since Joseph was a skilled laborer, it would have been the custom for Jesus to grow up learning and working in that trade). Here he was, reading Scripture to them (it shows Jesus knew how to read) and interpreting it for them. Not only was he interpreting it, he was claiming to be the one the Scriptures were speaking of (in reality claiming a dignity and honor higher than any of them: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me..."). I expected they took serious offense at that.

Looking at the passage more closely, there is an inference that they expected to have some claim on him and on his wondrous powers. It's almost as if they were saying stay here and take care of us: "do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum." Jesus' answer implied not only would he reach out to help others in other places, but like Elijah and Elisha he would even share God's blessings with pagans. Elijah healed a Syrian general and Elisha provided food for a Gentile widow and her son and raised her son back to life. I suspect the anger they felt was because Jesus had taken or was likely to take God's favors to others beyond Nazareth. He might show his favor and love even to those who were not Jews.

I think the lesson here for us is that we subconsciously think we should get preferential treatment from God if we live the way he taught us. In other words, if I do what God wants, he should do what I want. It's true, not only do we see that bad things happen to good people, but good things happen to bad people. We think it shouldn't be that way. But in this life it is. It is in the next life that all will be made fair. Then again, when we stop and think about it and count our blessings, we discover we have been greatly blessed. I always enjoy Archbishop Pilarczyk's answer whenever anyone asks him "How are you doing Archbishop?" He always answers "better than I deserve." The ways of God are sometimes mysterious, we can't always find the answers as to why things happen and that's why Jesus insists that we have faith in him.

How did he get away from the crowd who were going to throw him off of a cliff? Luke gives us no clue. It just wasn't his time – but remember even his time of undeserved suffering would come – but so would his resurrection. Amen.