

Mary Mother of God - A Cycle

January 1, 2012

I usually try to write a fresh homily every Sunday, one that's not yet been printed in any of my books, but as I looked back over homilies I have preached on this date, I found one that I thought was interesting enough to repeat. We celebrate New Year's Day today, and most countries in the world do, but not everyone. Many cultures have their own New Year's Day. For example, the Jewish new year begins on Rosh Hashanah which will begin this year at sunset on September 16, 2012, and lasts until nightfall on the 18th (two full days) (that would give you a good hangover). Back in 1990, I was in Israel on Rosh Hashanah at the Wailing Wall, the place where the Temple stood before the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD and I witnessed the rabbis blowing of rams' horns to start their New Year. The Chinese have their own New Year celebration, which will be on Jan. 23 of 2012. It will begin the year of the dragon. The Moslem New Year began on Nov. 26, 2011. Their next New Year will be Nov. 14, 2012. Their year is 11 to 12 days shorter than ours. We tend to think everyone in the world should think the way we do. There are many other cultures who celebrate their own new year at times and seasons different than we do. January 1 was chosen as the start of the New Year by the early Romans in 153 BC. Prior to that date, they celebrated the New Year in the spring which has a certain logic to it since winter is over and nature starts to come alive at that time. In 153 BC the Roman senate chose January 1 as the beginning of a new year because that was the day when the Roman consuls took office. (Maybe they used the start of the New Year to give themselves an increase in salary and they didn't have to wait three months until the beginning of spring to start their salary.) It is said they celebrated with "boisterous joy, superstitious practices and gross orgies." The early Christians made January 1 a day of penance as a reaction against the excesses of the pagans. Eventually Christians designated January 1 as the first feast in the Church calendar dedicated to Mary, Jesus' mother. Incidentally, many European countries didn't officially make January 1 the start of the new year until the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Now practically all big cities of the world celebrate on January 1 even if they have their own new year, like China.

The Church calendar begins a new liturgical year on the first Sunday of Advent. For the Church January 1 presents us with several themes. It is first of all the octave of Christmas. Christmas is too important a feast for just a one-day celebration, so the liturgy celebrates Christmas solemnly for eight days. After today, the liturgy continues to celebrate Christmas, but less solemnly, until the feast of the Baptism of our Lord which this year is on Monday, January 9th, the day after the feast of the Epiphany. Today also recalls the circumcision of Jesus, which traditionally took place for a Jewish boy on the eighth day after birth. It's also the day on which a child was officially named - although both Joseph and Mary were told ahead of time by an angel that his name would be Jesus - a name which means "God saves." On this day we might reflect for a moment how respectful we are of this name by which we are to be saved. For many years now the popes have designated this day as a day of prayer for peace, which is so badly needed in today's world.

There are a lot of reasons to gather in prayer today. A new year begins new opportunities to grow in God's grace and favor, new opportunities to learn, new opportunities to discover ways to treat the ills we suffer from, new ways to heal from what we have lost in the past, new ways, hopefully, to create a world in which the poor are fed and in which we can all live together in peace. I might mention that today is an anniversary for our own parish too. On December 29, 20 years ago, St. Boniface and St. Patrick's parishes merged. It is something the people of our two parishes can be proud of that the merger went so well. This new year gives us new opportunities to prosper and grow and serve the members of our parish and to share God's word with our neighbors in Northside. We also honor Mary, the Mother of God, in this, the most ancient feast of Mary in the Church calendar. We ask her to intercede for us that this may be a blessed year for all of us. Amen.

Second Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle

January 15, 2012

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INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading is about Samuel who lived a little more than 1000 years before Christ. Samuel was a person of major importance in the Old Testament. He was a great prophet, he anointed King Saul as Israel's first king, and later he anointed David to be king. He had an unbelievable influence over the religious and political climate of his day and for many centuries thereafter. At the beginning of the book of Samuel, we are told that his mother, Hannah, was unable to have children; she suffered bitterly over that fact. She constantly prayed for a son; she promised God if she had a son she would dedicate him to God's service. God heard her prayer. When Samuel was still a young child, Hanna brought him to the High Priest, Eli. Eli cared for the Arc of the Covenant, and he raised Samuel to assist him in his service to God. This will give some background to today's first reading.

HOMILY: I think we have been doing very well here at St. Boniface in accepting and adjusting to the new translation of the prayers of the Mass. Some of the translations I personally find a little awkward, but on the whole I feel very comfortable with most of the prayers and I feel they are very beautifully worded. I promised I would do some more explanation of the changes, and today's readings gives me that opportunity. John the Baptist points to Jesus as the "Lamb of God." The idea of sacrifice is written all over that expression. The Greek word used here for "lamb" (amn?s) does not mean just any lamb. It means a one year-old lamb without blemish. That was the only kind of lamb that could be offered to God in sacrifice. We all know that at Passover time a lamb was sacrificed and it became the centerpiece of the Passover meal for each Jewish family. St. John's gospel refers to this sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, which took place about noon on the preparation day for Passover. John tells us this was the exact time that Pilate sentenced Jesus to death. The Lamb of God would be sacrificed at the same time the Passover lamb was being sacrificed. But lambs were not only sacrificed at Passover. Every day throughout the year, two lambs were sacrificed in the Temple as a morning and evening offering. At other times, a lamb was offered as a sin offering, as an offering of praise and

adoration, as a thanksgiving sacrifice or as a request for some favor from God. It was always a one year-old lamb without blemish. Why a lamb? Sheep were a major part of the Jewish life. From sheep the Jews got wool for clothes, meat (on special occasions) and milk and they found other uses for sheep's skin and horns such as for tents and writing material. But what kind of a gift is this that we give God. He made everything there is. The only thing we can really give him is ourselves. Since we can't just lie down and die, we offer something that represents value to us; we offer something that symbolizes our life; we don't offer some meaningless object that we could just as easily throw away. God can see in our heart how meaningful are our offerings of love or praise or repentance. In the course of time, the sacrifices of lambs and calves and wine and oil and cereal offerings was to be replaced by a more perfect sacrifice, offered by one who would represent the whole human race, one who would offer perfect love to the Heavenly Father. This one's sacrifice would put an end to all other sacrifices for it would be perfect not just momentarily but forever. Each person could make this one perfect sacrifice their own when they wanted to approach the Father with praise or love or repentance or petitioning a favor for Paul tells us today, "whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him." No greater sacrifice can be offered to God than the Lamb of God. We praise Jesus as the Lamb of God in the Gloria. At the Passover supper, when the Jewish family ate the Paschal lamb that had been sacrificed they knew they were eating sacred food, they pictured themselves eating and drinking with God. Later on in the Mass, as we prepare to participate in Jesus' sacrifice by eating of the sacred food he offers us, we say or sing the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, and we ask him to have mercy on us and to bring us peace. Then the priest holds up the Eucharist and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." It is truly the supper of the Lamb because Jesus becomes our food and our drink. But this supper looks to future glory as well. In the Book of Revelation (19,9), there is a brief mention of the supper of the Lamb being a marriage celebration. It is not described for it is too awesome to describe. Isaiah gives us a hint of it when he tells us that in the heavenly Jerusalem, God would provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy rich food and pure choice wines; God would destroy death forever and wipe away the tears from all faces. (Is. 25, 6ff) Jesus gives us a hint of it in one of his parables about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. Can you imagine what an elaborate affair that would be? (Mt. 22,1ff) Many people watched on TV the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. The wedding feast in Jesus' parable would have matched that and more since weddings at Jesus' time went on for a few days. (That's why they ran out of wine in Cana, but Jesus solved that problem. They won't run out in heaven.) Pope John Paul encouraged us to nourish ourselves with this Eucharistic Bread for it will sustain us and support our faith for as he said: "only he who perseveres will be worthy to share in the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Radio message, July 22, 1984) (from The Navarre Bible: Revelation, pg 135) After the priest proclaims the Eucharist to be the Lamb of God, the people respond with a passage from Matthew 8,8 where Jesus was asked to heal the servant of a Roman centurion (a Gentile). Jesus said he would come and cure the sick person. It was forbidden for Jews to enter a Gentile home and the centurion was sensitive to that. He answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed."

As you can see there is a lot in this little phrase: "The Lamb of God." And much more could be said. The Church, along with John the Baptist, points to Jesus today as our sacrifice, our perfect gift we can offer God as we unite ourselves with Christ's sacrifice. It is the greatest prayer we can offer. It is the greatest gift God can offer us, his presence with us, his Word to us and himself in Holy Communion. Before leaving Mass today, see if you can notice the image of the lamb on our high altar. It is Jesus represented as a lamb in the Book of Revelation, the only one who could open the scroll that was sealed with seven seals and which revealed the future of the world. Amen.

Third Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle

January 22, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Whenever we think of Jonah, we think of his being swallowed whole by a great fish (the Bible makes no mention of a whale). The story of how he was swallowed by a fish is a long one, but basically he was trying to escape from the mission God gave him to preach repentance to the Assyrians. You need to know that the Assyrians were an especially warlike, aggressive, merciless people who lived on the Tigris River, 250 miles north of Baghdad. The Assyrians had already destroyed most of Israel by the time Jonah was written, so you can imagine there was deep hatred on the part of the Jews for the Assyrians. Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish before he was spit out on the shore of Assyria. Having learned he couldn't run away from God, Jonah decided he had better do what God wanted. The story about Jonah that we hear in our first reading today is more amazing than the part of the story about the fish. Without miracles or spectacular signs, Jonah proclaimed, unenthusiastically, a one-line warning to the people of Nineveh. In one day the entire city of Nineveh was converted. To get an idea of how astonishing this would be, think of an unknown individual showing up in Baghdad today, and in one day, every person, including all the terrorists, repenting and converting to Christianity. Would that be something or what!!! Today's reading shows God is not interested in punishing people but in giving all people, even the bad guys, a chance to reform. The passage sets the theme for the gospel when Jesus began his public ministry by preaching repentance. We know from real life experience and from the experience Jesus and the Apostles had, calling people to change their lives is not as easy as the story of Jonah makes it appear to be.

HOMILY: A little girl was sitting on her grandfather's lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time she would reach up and touch his wrinkled cheek, then she would feel her own. Finally she asked, "Grandpa, did God make you?" "Yes, sweetie," he said, "a long time ago." Then she asked, "did God make me too?" "Yes, sweetheart," he answered, just a short time ago." Feeling his face and hers she observed, "God's getting better at it, isn't he?" Today St. Paul tells us "the time is running out. The world in its present form is passing away." When we are young we never think we will be old. But if we are fortunate it happens. Paul is telling us to use the time we have wisely. In Paul's mind that means to put God's kingdom before everything else. That's what Jesus is telling us in today's gospel too. "This is the time of fulfillment. The

kingdom of God is at hand." This is Jesus' message as he begins his ministry: the kingdom is at hand. It's not a place he is talking about, but something dynamic and active. It is God's rule over us, a rule that is something good - this is good news Jesus proclaims. It's good news because the God who reigns over us is not a fearsome, autocratic, authoritarian tyrant, but a father, a father who wants to share his love with all his children.

We can get lost in the kingdom of this world, attracted by its pleasures, depressed by its tragedies. None of it will last for a new kingdom, a new way of seeing, a new way of living is breaking into the world as we have come to know it. This theme on the kingdom is central to Jesus' ministry. He shows us by his exorcisms that there is no place for evil in the kingdom he announces; he shows us by his miracles that sickness and suffering will be eliminated; he feeds the multitude to show us no one will ever suffer from hunger; he uses parables to help us grasp what God's kingdom will be like; he shows us by raising people back to life and especially by his own resurrection that even death will be done away with. It's something different than the world has ever known. That's why he calls us to repent. It's a word that means change. Change our mind, change our hearts, change our viewpoint, change the direction of our lives, change our values: that is put his kingdom first. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness..." (Mt. 6,33) Everything else is secondary. We have to live in this world, we have to use the things of this world, we have to have clothes, food, warmth, a place to live, friends to support us, these are all necessary, but as Paul tells us today we must use the world as not using it fully." (I Cor. 7,31) That means living in this world and NOT using it as if that's all that's important to me. "Seek first the kingdom of God ...and all these things will be given to you besides." (Mt. 6,33)

Getting this message out to everyone was a big job, and so we hear in today's gospel Jesus calling on others to help him. Jesus continues to need people to help him share his good news. At the request of the Archbishop, we pray at the end of each Mass that there will be enough people to step forward to help bring about the kingdom Jesus announced.

The reason we are here at Mass today is because we believe in Christ. Unless there's a St. Francis among us, I suspect there is room for improvement in all of us. Jesus' call to conversion is sort of like New Year's resolutions. We make New Year's resolutions because we realize we can do better; we can be better; we have more potential than we are using.

Until we hopefully reach heaven where we will be perfect, there'll always be room for improvement, always some areas of our lives where we could be more fully dedicated to the kingdom. Would that conversion were as easy as the book of Jonah pictures it. If it were, we wouldn't have to be reminded of it so often. Amen.

Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle

January 29, 2012

INTRODUCTION: (Deut 18, 15-20; I Cor. 7, 32-35; Mark 1, 21-28) Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians might be difficult to understand. So I would like to give a little background. The passage comes from a section of the letter where Paul replies to several questions he received in a letter from the Corinthians. In today's reading he is dealing with a question about marriage and celibacy. Paul begins by affirming the value of marriage and then he moves on, which is today's reading, to affirm the value of celibacy. He is not making a rule, but a suggestion to those who were not yet married or who were widowed and he points out the advantages of remaining in such a state (i.e. unmarried). Behind this suggestion was the expectation of the early Church, including Paul, that Jesus was going to return very soon and with his coming the world would come to an end. To quote what Paul said in last week's reading: "the time is running out" and "the world as we know it is passing away." If it sounds as if Paul is overemphasizing the spiritual advantages of celibacy, consider how you might view things with regard to getting married and starting a family if you seriously thought that probably in a year or three the world would end and Jesus would return.

Some background about our first reading might also be helpful. The setting is on the East side of the Jordan River across from the Promised Land. After many years in the desert, God's people were ready to cross the Jordan and enter a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses knew that God was calling him to leave this world and God's people would cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land without him. Basically he is saying "goodbye." He assures them God would not leave them without direction or leadership. God would send them another prophet like himself who would speak God's word to them. We usually think of a prophet as a person who foretells the future and sometimes the prophet did, but the best definition of a prophet is at the end of today's first reading: one who speaks God's word. Our first reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus speaks God's word with power and authority.

HOMILY: I believe that Jesus' experience with demons was also real. I would grant that probably in many situations epilepsy or mental illness were considered to be caused by demons, but I believe in other cases, it was the real thing Jesus was fighting against. Exorcisms make up the largest single category of healings in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. If in some cases Jesus was dealing with mental illness or epilepsy, we need to remember Jesus was a Jew who lived two thousand years ago. He was a man of his times and he saw his job was to do battle with evil, whether it was an evil spirit or the evil of disease. We, as his followers, try to make the world a better place and eliminate evil to the extent that we can. I would like to particularly speak about a great evil today - the evil of abortion. All priests received a letter this week from the Archbishop asking us to publicize a major threat to our belief in the sanctity of life. I have put a copy of his letter as an insert in today's bulletin, (on one side of the blue sheet - on the other side are the results of our Thanksgiving festival). I want to read a couple of items from the Archbishop's letter. He said, "The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced last week that almost all employers, including Catholic employers, will be forced to

offer their employees health coverage that includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. Almost all health insurers will be forced to include those "services" in the health policies they write. And almost all individuals will be forced to buy that coverage as a part of their policies... And as a result, unless the rule is overturned, we Catholics will be compelled to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and suffer the penalties for doing so)." The Archbishop, at the end of his letter, is asking two things of us: 1) to fast and pray that wisdom and justice may prevail and religious liberty may be restored. 2) to visit the web (the address is in his letter), to learn more about this severe assault on religious liberty, and how to contact Congress in support of legislation that would reverse the Administration's decision.

You may have heard this before, but consider the following three situations:

- 1) A preacher and his wife are very poor and almost destitute. They already have 14 children when she finds out she's pregnant with the 15th. Considering their impoverished status and the excessive global population, should an abortion be recommended?
- 2) A father is sick. The mother has tuberculosis. They have four children. The oldest is blind, the second has already died, the third is deaf, and the fourth also has TB. The mother is pregnant again. Should an abortion be recommended?
- 3) A young, unmarried teenager becomes pregnant, greatly shaming her family. Although she recently got engaged, her fiance is not the father of the baby, and he's beside himself with grief and anger. Should an abortion be recommended?

If you said yes to the first case, John Wesley, one of the greatest evangelists of the 19th century would have been aborted. In the second case, Beethoven. In the third case it would have been Jesus Christ himself.

The so called "pro-choice" people (who ironically do not consider whether the infant might have a choice in the matter of whether it lives or dies) say: "it's uncertain when human life begins. That's a religious question." Well it's scientific too. The DNA in a fertilized ovum shows the zygote is not that of a tree or a chicken or a chimpanzee or any other living thing except that of a human. Some say it doesn't look like a human. The question is what should a human look like? Does a male look like a female, does a Englishman look like an African, does a one year-old look like a fifteen year-old,? Does a fifteen year old look like a fifty year-old? A fertilized ovum looks exactly like a human being ought to look at that stage of development! Killing a defenseless, innocent human being is a great evil! Multiply that by the incidence of this taking place, by 3,288 per day (stat from 2009), and we have to be astounded at how much evil our country is guilty of." We who hold life is sacred should not be forced into supporting such horrendous evil. Edmund Burke is credited with having said: "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."