

Homily for January 1, 2021
Mary Mother of God

Beholding His Face

Every mother remembers the experience. For some of you this might be your experience right now, for others of you it might be an experience that you relive through photographs, and videos, and in your memory. The experience of holding your baby and beholding his or her face for the first time. It is one of the most beautiful of scenes, the encounter between mother and child as the two of them interact with each other, the mother looking into the face of the child who has been formed in her womb and now welcomed into the world and received into her arms.

In today's Mass we are invited to think of this experience in a special way as we ponder Mary the Mother of God beholding the face of her beloved son, Jesus. In today's psalm the theme of the face of God is expressed in this prayer of blessing.

May the Lord be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

What does it mean for the face of God to shine upon us? It means that he looks on us with his favour. At the beginning of each year the first reading from Numbers and Psalm 67 are the appointed texts. The very first thing we hear liturgically on January 1st is the Aaronic Blessing and the Psalm of Blessing, asking for the face of God to shine upon each of us as we begin 2021.

Today we ponder with Mary the face of her Son.

As we remember the ancient blessing God gave the Israelites through the Aaronic Priesthood, we can appreciate how these words are fully realized in the Incarnation. These are words Jewish priests repeated over many centuries.

To know the blessing of God is to know his favour and grace. At the very beginning of Genesis, after the creation of the man and the woman, God's very first act is to bless them. We read:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply".

The rest of the Biblical narrative is the story of the unfolding of this blessing. A blessing so filled with fecundity, possibility but alas also filled sadness and disappointment because of the blight of sin. And so, because of sin the blessing now needs to also announce God's redemptive love. Therefore, it needs to become even more specific. This it does with the priestly blessing Aaron and his sons will pronounce. It is no longer "be fruitful and multiply". Now it is:

The LORD bless you and keep you:

²⁵*The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you:*

²⁶*The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

We know from the Old Testament that Moses could not look on the face of God and live. And yet here the face and countenance of God are pronounced as the fruit of this blessing so that the

people may know the graciousness of God and his peace. To know his graciousness is to know his mercy. To know his peace is to have restored to us the original blessing and favour announced in Genesis 1 so we can live orderly lives in relation to God, the created world, one another and ourselves.

This is where there is a connection between the original blessing of Genesis 1, the Aaronic blessing of the Book of Numbers, and the Feast we celebrate today. In Genesis God's blessing focusses on the fruitfulness that will result from conjugal love. The Aaronic blessing points to the fruitfulness that will result from the encounter of the Divine and human love that blesses Mary with a most unique and singular fecundity – the vocation to be the Mother of God. In her choosing to say yes to God, the Aaronic blessing now literally comes to life because the face of the Lord will at first shine in the loving exchange between mother and son, and between Joseph and the beloved entrusted to his care. Then his face will shine through his secret years and the public ministry that lasted for three years. It is here we will see his face most clearly. Especially during Holy Week, his beaten and bruised countenance will be on display for all to see from the Cross. Isaiah speaks of the reaction to this face when he writes:

***He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ¹***

But from the Cross we go to the empty tomb of Easter where is declared that the blight of sin that wants to spoil life's fruitfulness has been defeated. It is this face that we are invited to spend our lifetime beholding.

In the Gospel today we read that Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. There are two key Greek words here. What does it mean to say she treasured these words? Mary is taking the words of the shepherds and she is storing them up inside of her interiorly, in her heart and in her mind. The Greek word has about it the idea of putting money into a treasury. And then second, it says that she was pondering them in her heart. The Greek word here means to "throw together" or to "piece together" (Luke 2:19). So, it's an interesting expression because it kind of gives the connotation of Mary tossing these things around, pondering them, ruminating on them, turning over and over and piecing together the various parts of the mystery that is being revealed to her, of who her son really is, of who this little baby in the manger really is.

We get from this verse the idea that that as she beholds the face of the Saviour her heart is alive with wonder. It is this same kind of attentive to the Face of Jesus we are invited to cultivate as we treasure and ponder in our own hearts the meaning of this Face and to more fully discover what it means to have Mary as our Mother and Jesus our brother.

¹ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Is 53:3). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

As members of the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph today we uniquely honour Mary because it was from her womb and from the blessing of her hands that in turn we are blessed by Jesus. Mary uniquely pronounced and continues to pronounce the Aaronic blessing because she is the one who is always showing us the face of Jesus.

We are invited on this first day of 2021 to discover with Mary the graces afforded to us when we discover through His face the strength and courage to face whatever 2021 will hold in store for us. Though all her life, Mary treasured and ponder the meaning of the one whose face shows us the gracious mercy of God and imparts to us a peace that the world cannot give.