

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (Year A) 1st January 2023

This year, as always, we enter the New Year in the company of Mary, the Mother of Christ. It was her 'yes' to the angel that opened the way to our salvation; she it was that ushers the shepherds, breathless and excited, into the stable; she is the one that invites each of us to come to the manger; and Mary is the one that invites us to join her and accompany her in a new year. Mary is the woman of New Life, the midwife of eternity breaking into the world of time, and so it is fitting that she is the one who guides us through the curtain, leaving the old year behind, and walking together into a year that is new. It will be full of challenges, and perhaps some losses and sadnesses too; but it will also be a time of hope, and a time when we draw strength from Mary, the woman of new life.

Some years ago, on the last celebration of this feast before his resignation, Pope Benedict of Blessed memory reflected on Mary and on her serenity in a time of turmoil. This is what he said.

We may ask ourselves: what is the basis, the origin, the root of peace? How can we experience that peace within ourselves, in spite of problems, darkness and anxieties? The reply is given to us by the readings of today's liturgy. The biblical texts, especially the one just read from the Gospel of Luke, ask us to contemplate the interior peace of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. During the days in which "she gave birth to her first-born son" (Lk 2:7), many unexpected things occurred: not only the birth of the Son but, even before, the tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, not finding room at the inn, the search for a chance place to stay for the night; then the song of the angels and the unexpected visit of the shepherds. In all this, however, Mary remains even tempered, she does not get agitated, she is not overcome by events greater than herself; in silence she considers what happens, keeping it in her mind and heart, and pondering it calmly and serenely. This is the interior peace which we ought to have amid the sometimes tumultuous and confusing events of history, events whose meaning we often do not grasp and which disconcert us. (January 1st 2013)

Mary has received a rare blessing, she has the gift of serenity, a gift that leaves her undisturbed as the storm rages around her. Who could we want more to lead us into an uncertain new year than one with a gift such as that? She would have heard, time and again, the words we have read from the Book of Numbers, the words of the priestly blessing, 'May the Lord let his face shine on you...may the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace'. She is a person who knows that peace comes to the person who gazes on the face of God. Her serenity, her ability to preserve absolutely undisturbed the place within which is the home of God, stems from her deep conviction that 'God is close, and so all is well'. It is this conviction that has sustained her through the angel's visit, the doubts of Joseph, the gossip of the neighbours, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the visit of the shepherds, and everything else that has come, and all the trials that still remain. 'God is close, and so all is well'. It is her extraordinary privilege to look daily on the face of God as she cradles him in her arms. As she welcomes us and draws us into the new year with her, we know that she does so as one whose life has found its meaning in

gazing on the face of God. Like everyone else, she was astonished at the story that the shepherds told in today's Gospel. But, whereas most of us might respond by chattering and talking about these events, she withdraws into that quiet, tranquil place within where she can reflect and ponder on what all this means, and once the meaning becomes clear, to treasure it.

All of us hope for peace in this coming year. We long for a world in which violence and hate and greed and pride are disarmed and left powerless. It can seem a great deal to ask. But what we can all do, is to try and become seeds of peace sown in our little part of the world. The one who is as serene as the Virgin Mary has no need of aggression, because they already possess everything that is worth having, and possess it in a way that can never be stolen from them. We can visit Mary in that stable, and as she ushers us inside she invites us to look on the face of her Son, to gaze on the face of God, which is the source of every blessing and of all peace; and looking on that beautiful face we hear her remind us, from a heart that has for so long treasured and pondered all these things, that '*God is close, and so all is well*'. And, while this will not remove all of the worry and the stress of the year that lies ahead, it does at least help us to keep things in proportion. May the Lord bless us and keep us, may the Lord let his face shine on us and be gracious to us. May the Lord uncover his face to us, and bring us peace.

And here, to conclude, is the prayer with which Pope benedict ended that final homily for this Feast:

May the Virgin Mary, whom today we venerate with the title of Mother of God, help us to contemplate the face of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. May she sustain us and accompany us in this New Year: and may she obtain for us and for the whole world the gift of peace. Amen!

And may her prayers bring Benedict, that good and faithful servant, to his eternal reward.