

Mary, Mother of God - New Year's Day – Years ABC (Homily 01)

“Pray, Bless and Praise”

(Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21)

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Ritual, Theology and Narrative: these three words succinctly describe the three readings for today.

In essence, they call us to bless one another; pray like Mary, and worship God like the shepherds.

As we begin this New Year, it seems appropriate to think about blessings. The ritual of blessing things and people is one of the ways that popular religion lives on in our day.

The word blessing comes from the Latin “benedicere”, to speak well of, someone or some thing. To bless is to affirm; to build up, to see the good and the positive in the other, in the end, to love that person in a very sincere and personal way.

Ron Rolheiser, noted Oblate theologian and author, shares how when he left for the seminary, his parents had him kneel on the kitchen floor, placed their hands on him, and blessed him. That special moment has stayed with him and empowers him to this day.

Rolheiser mentions that Jean val Jean, in the musical “Les Miserables” is a beautiful example of blessing. As an old man, Jean goes out to the front lines of the revolutionary confrontation in Paris, looking for the young man his adopted daughter plans to marry. He finds him asleep and prays to God that he might be safe. He asks God to take his own life because he is old and has lived long. He begs God to spare this young man who will take his daughter away from him, because he is young and has his life ahead of him. This is the blessing of a grandfather – to step back, let the younger one shine, be generative and empower the youth.

One of the participants at a Search weekend for youth in northern Saskatchewan years ago did not have a letter from her parents and family which is an important part of the event. This girl suffered from extreme shyness and was unable to speak in school until she reached grade nine. There she was affirmed and blessed, by a very caring teacher who patiently encouraged her, drew out of her the suffering she had undergone, and got her to start talking. Aware of how painful it would be for

her if she did not receive a letter like the other participants her pastor personally went to obtain a letter from her family. Their reaction was “Why do we have to write her a letter?” He actually dictated a letter to her brother which included a phrase like “We know that we don’t show it often but we do love you.” When she received that letter during the weekend, she went into shock and could not speak again for some time. When he asked her about that later, she said that she had never in her life heard anyone in her family speak to her in that way. She had never been blessed by her family, and was starving for affection. That letter was their first blessing to her.

As Christians, we must be about affirming and blessing one another as God has blessed us in Christ. The psalm is a beautiful prayer that God will be gracious to us and bless us with mercy. The second reading goes on to describe the **theology** of that blessing. In Christ God has redeemed us. Redemption is all about being forgiven through the death and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, we have been adopted as children of God. Adoption is all about belonging and birthright. We have become children of God and heirs to the kingdom through faith and baptism. We are truly loved and blessed by our God.

One particular couple adopted two boys after they found out they could not have children of their own. Their pastor is constantly amazed and in awe at how they are living out that adoption; how they have taken those two boys as their own through thick and thin. It is to those two adopted boys that they will leave their inheritance. Adoption as they are living it speaks very strongly of what it means that God has adopted us in Christ, blessed us in Christ, with all that God can give us – peace, joy, intimate union, eternal life. What a blessing is ours in Christ.

The Gospel simply provides the **narrative**, the human touch to the theology of blessing, redemption and adoption in Christ. That beautiful story of the birth of Jesus touches human hearts throughout the ages. The response of Mary and the shepherds to this tremendous blessing of God in the child Jesus is a call to us to respond in like fashion. We must also take this mystery to heart and ponder it in prayerful silence. And we must also follow the example of the shepherds, witnessing to all about this event, and then living lives of praise and worship, precisely what we are gathered here to do today.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is in itself another of God’s greatest blessings. The love of God that blesses us, revealed to us through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is made present to us today through Word and Sacrament. We are truly blessed with healing, forgiveness and love. We are empowered to go

out to ponder this mystery like Mary, and to be a blessing to the world. We are sent out to witness to others about this great event, and to give praise and glory to our God like the shepherds.

So remember, in Christ God has truly loved us and blessed us. Let us now prayerfully ponder this great love like Mary. Let us also bless one another by witnessing to this great mystery and leading lives of praise and worship like the shepherds.