

Mary Mother of God

January 1, 2009

I entertained myself this afternoon looking up information about the new year. I've always wondered how January 1 became New Year's Day. I wondered how other cultures celebrate new year's. I've always known that the Jewish new year begins on Rosh Hashanah which will fall on September 18, 2009. I've always known that the Chinese have their own new year celebration which this year will be Jan. 26, 2009. Because their calendar is a little shorter than ours, the Moslems began two new years' in 2008; one in January and another in December. But I was amazed to see all the other cultures that have their own new year at different times and seasons. January 1 was chosen as the start of the new year by the early Romans in 153 BCE. Prior to that date they celebrated the new year in the spring which seems logical since nature starts to come alive at that time. But in 153 BCE the Roman senate chose January 1 as the beginning of a new year because that was the day when the Roman consuls took office. The date is quite arbitrary. 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 it was made a feast of Mary as the "Mother of God." I learned too that 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 January 1 even if they have their own new year, like China.

The Church's celebration of the new year is the first Sunday of Advent. It makes little reference to January 1 as the start of a new year as it falls during 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. Although the angel had already told Joseph that Mary's son was to be named Jesus, today also recalls the day on which Jesus was circumcised and officially given his name. We might reflect for a moment how respectful we are of this name by which we are to be saved. Pope Paul VI asked that today be observed as a day of prayer for peace, which is so badly needed in today's world.

As we celebrate the beginning of 2009 we are hopeful nations might find a better way than waging war to get along with one another. We are hopeful also that our world will be more just, that life will be respected, that we might enjoy health and happiness. Although we may party at this time of year, we also have a lot of reasons to be here in church, to seek God's help in the coming year, and to thank him for his help in the past.

Mary, the Mother of God and our spiritual mother gives us an example of how to enter into this new year. We are told she reflected on all these events in her heart. What events? The annunciation by the angel, the visit to her cousin Elizabeth, Jesus' birth, the visit by the shepherds and the magi. May we too continue to reflect on them in our hearts. The rosary can help us in this. May we come to know God's support as we move another year closer to the kingdom of his eternal love. Amen.

Feast of the Epiphany

January 4, 2009

INTRODUCTION: 587 years before Christ, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. It was a difficult time for the Jews, rebuilding their country 50 years after it had been destroyed. Their Temple was gone. Jerusalem, their city that gave them such pride, was in shambles. The prophet in today's first reading tries to encourage the people and assures them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming a light for all the world. People would come from everywhere to visit Jerusalem and to be nourished by the radiant light of God's presence. St. Matthew sees the vision of the prophet fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the visit of the magi.

HOMILY: There are so many lessons we can learn from the story of the magi. I am going to dwell on only two of them. They are themes that are very dear to St. Matthew's gospel and I want to spend a few moments showing how these themes appear again and again in his gospel.

First is the theme that God wants all people to be saved. The Jews, as God's chosen people, believed they had a monopoly on salvation. The magi were foreigners, not members of God's chosen people, but they represent all nations whom God calls to know him through Jesus. As we read further on in Matthew's gospel we see how this theme is repeated. Although Jesus instructed his apostles not to go into pagan territory when he sent them out to preach, Jesus himself did not hesitate to cure the servant of a pagan, a Roman centurion. He even marveled at the centurion's faith and on that occasion remarked that "many will come from the east and the west and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven" while many of the "chosen people" would miss out. In another place he cured the daughter of a Canaanite woman after he challenged her faith. But most of all, the theme of universal salvation comes through clearly in St. Matthew's gospel when Jesus is about to ascend into heaven. He tells his apostles "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you."

The visit of the magi tells us God has opened up the doors of salvation to all people, but, and this is the second theme, not everyone chooses to enter into God's kingdom. The story of the magi tells us we have to put some energy and time into finding God and entering into eternal life. Entrance into God's eternal kingdom doesn't come automatically. It doesn't even come if we know our religion perfectly but don't live it. The magi came quite a distance, hundreds of miles, probably even over a thousand, to find Jesus. They had to keep searching, even seeking help from the paranoid king Herod and the indifferent Jewish clergy who had all the answers, but not enough interest in finding the messiah themselves. God's kingdom is for everyone, but not everyone comes looking for it and only those who do, find it. It is a theme we find repeated in

many of the teachings of Jesus in St. Matthew's gospel. For example, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us the person who listens to his words and acts on them is like a person who builds his house on rock, whereas a person who listens to his words but does not act on them is like the person who builds his house on sand. It will end up in ruins. The theme is repeated in a number of parables. Here's eight that come to mind immediately: 1) the sower and the seed, 2) the wheat and the weeds, 3) the buried treasure and the pearl of great price, 4) the parable about two sons, one who told his father he would do the work his father asked of him but didn't and the other who said he wouldn't, but did, 5) the wedding feast where those invited were too busy to come, 6) the parable of the talents where one man didn't do anything with his talent and lost it in the end, 7) the ten virgins, five of whom were prepared when the groom arrived, and five who missed out on the wedding feast because they were not ready for the groom's arrival. 8) Matthew is the only gospel who gives us the parable of the last judgment when those who were kind and good to the needy were rewarded while those who weren't were rejected from the kingdom.

God's word is absolutely contradicted by our modern day culture, which tells us everyone somehow is going to make it into heaven. The story of the magi shows us those who sincerely search for Christ will find him, but unfortunately not everyone is interested in searching for him sincerely. We ask him today to help us not to get lazy or discouraged as we continue seeking him. His light and grace will always guide us. If we faithfully follow that light, we can be confident we will be saved for Christ for he came a long way to find us and suffered much in order to do so. We recall his saving love as we continue our Mass. Amen.

Baptism of the Lord

January 11, 2009

INTRODUCTION

Many kings, prophets, and holy people served God in Old Testament times, but in four places in the book of the prophet Isaiah, God speaks of someone with whom he is especially pleased. This servant is not identified by name, and because the passages are in poetic form, they are usually referred to as the servant songs. They were written about 500 years before Christ. Perhaps the passages refer to someone who was alive at the time of the prophet but, amazingly, although they were written 500 years before the time of Christ, they describe Jesus so perfectly. At Jesus' baptism, the voice of God is heard, introducing Jesus to the world, as not only his servant, but as his beloved Son.

HOMILY

Today we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Even though it is an event that took place roughly 30 years after Jesus' birth and the coming of the Magi, it is a feast that fits with the theme of Epiphany. Epiphany means to cause something to be seen, to show, to illuminate or manifest. In last week's feast God revealed his son to the world as represented by the magi.

God again reveals his son at the baptism by John the Baptist with his declaration from heaven: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." So, if you think we are a little slow about removing our Christmas decorations, they are still appropriate to the season. On Monday, Ordinary time begins. It is then that the Christmas/Epiphany season is over. Since they are still so beautiful, we may keep a few poinsettia's around for another week or so.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. It's hard for us to understand why Jesus, the sinless one, God's Son, came to John for a baptism of repentance. Even John the Baptist had difficulty understanding why Jesus came to him for baptism. As John said "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" Because it is difficult to understand, various explanations have been offered as to why Jesus was baptized. 1) Some of the early Church Fathers said Jesus went into the water of the Jordan, not in order to be made holy, but to make the water holy so that all the waters of the world would become life giving through the sacrament of baptism. 2) It crossed my mind that another possible reason Jesus went to be baptized was to show us what his baptism would do, that his baptism would bring the Spirit down upon us and we would become God's beloved children. 3) Inauguration is on everyone's mind these days. Perhaps we can see Jesus' baptism as his official inauguration as he began the work the Father had given him. He was ready to proclaim the gospel, the good news, that for those who turned their hearts to God, God's Kingdom was there for them. The Father and the Spirit put their approval on him and would guide him in this ministry to the world.

4) The last possible explanation I have is perhaps Jesus went to be baptized as an example to us that we are to be baptized in order to become God's sons and daughters. Right before Jesus ascended into heaven he sent his apostles to continue his work (and that by the way is what the word "apostle" means: one who has been sent). He told them: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." If these were his last words, as St. Matthew tells us, baptism must be really important to our Lord.

Most of us do not remember our baptism. We don't remember most of the things that happened to us in our earliest year. Yet those are the things that gave direction to our lives: how we were to treat others, what kinds of food we were to eat, how to care for ourselves, how to act in public, how we were to be educated. In taking us for baptism our parents were setting a direction for us, setting us on the path to holiness through faith in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes parents take their child for baptism because they think they should, but they fail to see the life of Christ that baptism gives has to be nourished and to have opportunity to grow. You might have heard the story about the family who took their second child to church for baptism and after the baptism the older child who was three years old sobbed all the way back home. His father asked what was wrong. He said, "the priest said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home and I want to stay with you guys."

Baptism gives Christ's life, a life that needs to be nurtured and given the opportunity to grow just like the baby's physical life does. Some more fundamental religions say let the child grow up and get baptized when they're older so they can make their own choice as to what religion they want to belong to. Parents don't do that with anything else that's important. They don't say we won't send you to school and when you're old enough you can decide what you need to learn; or we'll let you eat whatever you want until you're old enough to decided for yourself. Baptism gives God's life and sets the direction for that life. The child, when he or she is grown, will have to make his or her own choice as to if and how much he or she will be faithful to Christ. When they see their children begin to drift away, that's when a lot of parents do some heavy praying. If this happens, don't give up hope for them and don't stop praying.

I feel as if my thoughts have drifted in various directions and I know much more could be said about baptism. I just want to leave you with one thought. Even though most of us may not remember our baptism, we should thank God, for in it he gave us life and the Spirit and he gave us a loving parent or parents to guide us in the ways of God.

Second Sunday Ordinary Time

January 18, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading is one of my favorite Old Testament stories. It's about Samuel who lived a little more than 1000 years before Christ. If you've ever read the Old Testament, you may remember there are two books in the Old Testament called Samuel, the first has 31 chapters and the second has 24 chapters. However, only the first 15 chapters of I Samuel actually deal with Samuel. The rest of I Samuel and all of II Samuel deal with King David. In our Sunday readings at Mass, we hear about Samuel only twice in a three-year cycle. Yet 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.

At the beginning of the book of Samuel, we are told that his mother, Hannah, was unable to have children and she suffered bitterly over the fact that she was barren. She promised God if she had a son she would dedicate him to God, which is what she did. When Samuel was still a young child, Hanna brought him to the Priest, Eli, who attended to the Arc of the Covenant in Shilo. Under Eli, Samuel would be raised and educated for God's service. This is the background to our first reading.

HOMILY: I'm sure we all have received calls that have changed our lives. There are the kind we hope we never receive; i.e., something tragic happening to someone we love. There are also the ones that change our lives in a good way. Some of you may have met a person at a friend's house or a party and you thought, "I would really like to get to know that person better." After exchanging phone numbers, the person gives you a call and as one thing leads to another you

become the best of friends. Your life has been changed and you are grateful for it.

Samuel got a call in the middle of the night. His life was changed and so were the lives of all God's people for hundreds of years thereafter, especially since Samuel is the person who established the monarchy and anointed Israel's first two kings. Martin Luther King received a call to the ministry and that led to other calls to struggle in a non-violent way for justice for all the people in our nation. Andrew and another disciple heard John the Baptist point out Jesus and they responded to Jesus' call to "come and see." The next day Peter received his brother Andrew's call to meet Jesus. Their call was not as dramatic as Samuel's was. It's very, very seldom that God calls out our name in the middle of the night as he did Samuel. Usually he speaks to us through others, through a religious person like John the Baptist or even through a relative or friend. Sometimes he speaks through someone we don't like. If we answer when God speaks, our lives will never be the same. Maybe that's why many people avoid quiet prayer. They might hear God say something they don't want to hear. They're comfortable with their life the way it is.

When I felt God was calling me to be a priest, I kept hoping it wasn't true. I hoped I could be like everyone else and get married some day and have children. But somehow God kept putting the idea of priesthood in my mind. Maybe that's why I like this story of Samuel so much. God just kept calling to me until finally I gave in and said to God: "speak Lord, for your servant is listening." I'm glad I answered "yes." Giving up marriage is hard at times, but so is being married hard at times. Being a priest has been very fulfilling in case anyone is thinking about it.

One thing I think is worth noting. Samuel got guidance from Eli in recognizing God's voice. The disciples first received guidance from John the Baptist in recognizing Jesus. At times we think maybe God is saying something to us but we're not sure. It doesn't have to be some big thing like going into religious life. It can be something as simple as volunteering for some kind of service to others or praying a little more. We think, "is this really what God wants?" It's helpful to get some guidance from a person whom we feel we can trust, who is wise and whom we consider as living a good Christian life. God does reach us through others. We see that all through the Scriptures. We see that in the sacraments. God touches us and speaks to us through others.

As we come together for the Eucharist, Christ is with us in each other. St. Paul just reminded us of this in our second reading – our bodies are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. Christ is also with us in our prayers and song, in the Scriptures and in Holy Communion. His eternal call to us is to holiness, which we attain to an ever-greater degree as we come to know him and love him.