

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 1st 2019

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

The Roman god, Janus had many tasks to perform. He guarded gates and doorways. He was the god of beginnings and endings as well. His image had two faces; one looking backward and the other toward the future. Jan-uary is both the first month of the new year and the last month of the former. I call upon him here at the beginning of this Reflection and hope he can bless your understanding of it when you reach its end. O, the word “janitor” also contains Janus as the god who offers peace at the ending, cleans things up and sets things right. I hope he can do that at the end of this.

The First Reading for this liturgy is an instruction from God through Moses to Aaron and his sons about how the blessing of God shall be rendered to the people of Israel. We can let it be also a blessing of us for each day of this new year when pondered slowly.

The Second Reading is a very short history of God’s entering into sacred time with God’s Son being born of a woman. We all are born again into that sacred time by the sending of the Spirit of Jesus through whom we come to know who we are, sisters and brothers made so “through God”.

In today’s Gospel, Mary is standing at the door of the stable. She looks backward to her Jewish history of God’s blessings and invitations. Mary stands at the gate of sacred time allowing the future in as she welcomes the simple shepherds to view the present, the present of the Timeless becoming time-bound. The shepherds return to their fields as the first to have their life-times rearranged by all they had seen and heard.

According to Jewish law and tradition, Jesus, male and human, is circumcised as a sign that He is received into the Jewish way and ways and is given the name which means, “He Who Saves.” Mary is His mother! As mother, Mary treasures memories as sacred time and while reverencing time-past, learns to watch and wait for meaning, for all that it will mean for her to be mother.

Is there really nothing we can do about our pasts? I was praying about this very question this morning. I am victimized by a gift-burden of the power of memory. Various aspects of my personal history are as vivid and present to me as events of yesterday or last week. “If only”, “Had I just,” “How stupid of me” and the like. What came to me in prayer was the consolation of the right now and gratitude for who I am I because of the past. I actually did do something about my past during my prayer. I accepted it, with all its goof-ups, as so many steps toward freedom for my future.

Israel made many mistakes and through them God was always faithfully creating a people. This one woman knew her nation’s history and trusted God’s future for her. She had her fears and questionings and the faith to take time to receive life, her own as well as her Son’s.

So we kneel or stand at the threshold between the past and the future. Mary knelt there in her days. She gave flesh to her human son. It is our faith that through her we receive God’s life- giving grace.

The Jesuit poet G. M. Hopkins wrote it this way.

“Of her flesh he took flesh:

He does take fresh and fresh,

Though much the mystery how,

Not flesh but spirit now

And makes, O marvellous!

New Nazareths in us,

Where she shall yet conceive

Him, morning, noon, and eve;

New Bethlems, and he born

There, evening, noon, and morn

Bethlem or Nazareth,

Men here may draw like breath

More Christ and baffle death;

Who, born so, comes to be

new self and nobler me

In each one and each one

more makes, when all is done,

Both God’s and Mary’s Son.”

The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to the Air We breathe.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

Blessed Old Year and New Year!

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