

Mary Mother of God (B)
(Numbers 6:22-27 / Luke 2:16-21)
01.01.2015

We read in today's gospel:

As for Mary she treasured all these things (all that concerned her son, the Christ) and pondered them in her heart.

We are invited to make this same attitude ours.

When we ponder all things concerning Christ in our hearts, then we live in that blessing of which our first reading from the Book of Numbers speaks to us: we live our lives bathed in God's own light, and, filled with His light, we come to taste Christ's special gift of peace.

Is it not true that when we love someone, we treasure all things concerning that person and we ponder these things in our hearts?

Just consider what we say when we speak of how we relate to our loved ones. Do we not say that we *carry them in our hearts*? We are not shy to say that we treasure them and that they are precious to us.

Yes, we carry our beloved in our hearts. We think of them frequently. We recall many graced moments of encounter with our loved ones. We remember the words they spoke, the gestures they posed in our regard, the ways they looked at us at certain moments.

All this is precious to us; we really treasure it.

Privileged moments, certain gestures, particular words, blessed exchanges, take on a depth of significance for us as time goes by and as circumstances change.

We find ourselves returning to the grace-filled, blessed memories we hold in our hearts in a special way when trials and painful passages arise. We think of the good times we enjoyed together when we hit upon rough patches in our relationships and are trying to make sense out of the difficulties we are encountering.

In our hours of trial and pain it is as if we need to bathe ourselves anew in the tide of good memories that inhabit our hearts in order to recover the blessing of those moments from the past to sustain and uphold us as we make our way through the challenges of the present time.

Parents are inclined to ponder in this way.

They frequently remember grace-filled, blessed moments with their children.

They think of their child's first word, their first step, the first time their child acknowledged them with a smile or when as an infant they first uttered the words *dada* or *mama* by which they recognised their father or mother to be their parent.

I know many mothers and fathers of adult children remember the innocent moments of their children's infancy when times get tough, when a son or daughter *goes off the rails*, as we say, or is in deep pain and real distress for whatever reason, or again when their child is taking some important life decision or making their chosen life engagement.

In his second poem on *Mary of Nazareth* found in his collection *The Witnesses* the poet Sansom gives expression to Christ's mother's reminiscences on the child she once carried as she sees the adult Jesus live His passion.

The poet has Mary say:

*I saw Him stretched on the cross-boughed tree,
With the world mocking,*

*The Life I carried torn with strains
That death was making ...*

*Now time cannot add to my heart's sorrow
The years have circled,
He becomes as he was when my breasts held him,
When a god was suckled.*

While I didn't watch the film *The Passion of the Christ* I did hear someone recount one scene in that film where Mary sees Jesus bound, being scourged and thrown to the ground, and as she watches this happening before, with her mind's eye, she sees Him anew as a child running freely about and playing in the sand.

To allow the tide of memories to wash over us and bathe us, to hold these memories in our hearts so that they may fill us with the blessing we need in the here and now, can be such an important exercise for us! It can prove itself nothing less than a life-saver at certain hours. It can *tide us over* and see us through moments of great suffering and pain, anxiety and distress.

We see in the Bible how the Hebrew people were encouraged over and over again to allow the tide of memories to wash over them, to bathe them entirely, to take hold of their hearts and fill them with a sense of their blessing by God.

As they made their way through history the Hebrews were continually invited to remember God's interventions of the past in order to draw strength from this memory for the present. They were regularly reminded of the tides through which they were led on their journey into freedom. They were reminded first of the crossing of the Red Sea, a crossing which saw them exit slavery in Egypt. The other side of this tide brought them into a graced space: the desert of Sinai. Here they were wooed and loved into being as God's own people.

They were also reminded again and again of the second crossing they had to make to enter into the Land of Promise: the time when they were led by Joshua to wade through the tide of the Jordan, holding fast to the Ark of the Covenant.

In saying all I have said so far I have been guided by some poetic lines that have long accompanied me and which I associate with a particularly graced moment in my life which dates back a number of years now.

At difficult moments along the way since then, I have recalled these lines. Frequently, I have found consolation in them as I have remembered not just the words I share with you, but the event I associate with these words: *Let the tide of memories wash over you ... Listen ... Refresh your mind ... Return to that place of peace.*

For me, and for all of us, ultimately, *that place of peace* is Christ!

Again and again we must return to Christ and allow ourselves to be, as the hymn writer puts it: *bathed in His tide.*

Soul of my Saviour bathe me in Thy tide. Wash me in waters flowing from Thy side.

Those waters which flowed from Christ's side are constantly engendering us to new birth.

Now a word about **God's blessing upon us and the peace that accompanies it.**

The words of Aaron's blessing, taken from the Book of Numbers, in today's first Scripture reading, are given to us by the Church's liturgy as *a word of life* for this first day of the New Year.

We are invited to take them to heart today - whatever is going on for us in our lives right now, wherever we may be on life's journey.

The choice of this reading for this first day of the year signifies the Church's desire to see us guided into the days ahead with the grace of holy hope firmly held on to in our hearts.

Aaron's simple, limpid, words of blessing reflect God's desire for us and for all His people.

They draw to our attention that the Lord is the source of all blessings.

They show Him to be the very fount of grace and peace: the One from whom flows the tide of blessings which carry us through life.

They remind us that all the grace and peace in which our lives are bathed come from God.

God's blessings reach out to us and are shared with us so that they may extend beyond us to those around us, to all who long for and stand in need of a sign of the Lord's favour, proximity, mercy and loving kindness.

I remember an abbot once saying on the day after his abbatial blessing: *I was blessed in order to bless.*

The truth is that we have all been blessed, we all are blessed, in order to bless others.

Called to be channels of God's grace and blessing, it befalls us to do all we can to be in relationship with the One who is the source of what are called to allow to pass through us and extend beyond us - seeing and sharing it God's gift to us for others.

Finally, a word on peace.

The Hebrew word *Shalom* which is used here in Aaron's blessing signifies much more than what we so often accept and settle for as peace: simply non-conflict.

Peace is more than that!

When we settle for just absence of conflict we are short-changing ourselves and others greatly. We are depriving ourselves and others of a share in the very life of God which is what is offered to us at Christmastide: a share in God's own life! This is what the Lord wants to see us enjoy!

Shalom is a complete sense of well-being. It is health and prosperity. It is inner contentment. It is all this and so much more!

Are these attitudes of mind and heart not what we long for, for ourselves to begin with and also to share with others?

I find it interesting to note in what context we find the very beautiful formula of blessing Aaron pronounced.

Aaron's blessing is found in what has long been known as *The Book of Numbers*.

This fourth book of the Torah has long been known as *The Book of Numbers* because of the census of Israel with which it opens and concludes.

However, the Hebrews' name for the book is something other than *Numbers*.

They refer to this book of the Bible as *The book 'From the Wilderness'* ... The Book '*In the Wilderness*'.

The title *In The Wilderness* better fits the content of the *Book of Numbers*.

This really is what the book of Numbers is all about: being in the wilderness ... and, mysteriously, being blessed by God in that desert space.

Just think about what is recorded in this book.

Do we not read therein how when they were in the wilderness God's people experienced greatly God's gentle loving kindness and His ever-benevolent patience?

No doubt, discipline was also learned in the desert, but this was offered in view of God's healing grace being accorded to God's people for their greater well-being.

In saying that, I recall to your memory that story found in Numbers 21 where the serpent of bronze was lifted up so that those who looked straight on at what had bitten them and poisoned their life could be healed of its debilitating, life-draining impact.

Let us apply all this to the reality of our own lives.

Would it not be true to say that frequently it is our *in the wilderness* experiences, the desert spaces we are led to traverse, that prove to be most fruitful in our lives?

Certainly, the prophets constantly hearken back to the wilderness wanderings as a time of great blessing for Israel.

It is *in the wilderness* we learn the true meaning of life. It is *in the wilderness* that we discover the importance and value of authentic relationships. It is *in the wilderness* that we discover what really matters and who is truly there for us.

This leads me to say, with faith and in hope, that, with time, I think many of us will be led to discover what Israel is shown to have discovered through the prophets: namely, in the end, with hindsight, we will come to see that the wilderness periods of our lives were times of extraordinary blessing, even though, at the time we were caught up in them, they appeared to us as far from that.

I am confident that with time, it will be revealed to us that our wilderness passages were moments of special blessing, filled with God's invisible, imperceptible, presence. God's blessing always goes over and beyond anything we might ever have imagine possible.

Let us dare to believe that today as we open our hearts to receive the blessing spoken over us:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord let His face shine upon you.

May the Lord uncover His face to you and bring you peace.

Amen!