

The Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary
(Romans: 8:28-30 / Matthew 1:1-16. 18-23)
08.09.2021

Today the Church would have us remember and give thanks for the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

To keep birthdays, to celebrate persons, is important. Henri Nouwen reflects on the importance of these annual commemorations in a few lines I will now share with you. He writes: *Birthdays need to be celebrated... It is important to celebrate a birthday... Celebrating a birthday is exalting life and being glad for it... We say to the one celebrated: 'Thank you for being born and being among us'.*

This liturgical feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is kept within our monastic family – the Benedictine Congregation of St Mary of Monte Oliveto – as its patronal feast. Given this, I see this day as providing us with an occasion to be thankful for the place of Mary not only in the story of our salvation, but especially for us monks for the grace afforded to us to be members of the particular monastic family of which we are part... a Congregation which is placed under Mary's prayerful patronage in the mystery of her birth.

I further suggest that we could all take this day as an occasion for us to give thanks for the gift of life afforded to us – and not least for the gift of the life of Jesus Christ within us. Today's feast reminds us that Jesus took flesh from the Blessed Virgin Mary. In doing so, the Christ came to be with God's People. Jesus – the One whom we believe to be the Messiah is *God-with-us*. We are called to enjoy communion with Him in every domain of our lives.

The monks would do well to take this feast as a day in which to give thanks for the gift of our monastic vocation, while imploring the grace to be renewed in our response to God's call to live a *preferential love for Christ* according to the Rule of St Benedict.

Over and beyond the invitation some of us hear to consider our call as Olivetan monks today, I further hear today's Gospel reminding all of us that we are (each and every one of us) *members of the one family of Jesus Christ*. You will all remember that line found in the Gospels in which Jesus declared: *My family (My mother and brothers and sisters) are those who listen to My word and seek to put it into practice*. Christ's family are those striving to do God's will in their lives, as He did the will of His Father in Heaven in His life.

If we are *all members of the one family of Jesus Christ*, then we are, all of us – at least, we are all meant to be and see ourselves as – *the spiritual descendants of Abraham*. We are the spiritual descendants of the long list of ancestors whose names we heard proclaimed in this morning's Genealogy from Matthew's Gospel.

When we consider that long list of names, what do we find therein? What we find is a mixed lineage. Matthew's Genealogy is a long ancestry made up of many known figures and many other unknown figures; a list in which some were great and good, people whose fame was an honourable one; others who were less honourable characters; some who were very shady figures indeed... men and women who were far from great and certainly not always good.

In the Genealogy of Jesus, we find those who were obscure. Maybe these largely unknown folk were very best of people, but we have little or no record of anything concerning them. We just know that they lived. Alongside these *unknowns* there are others who were well-known and acclaimed, but who were remembered more for infamy than fame. These were people of ill-repute. If some of those named were virtuous people; others were lacking in virtue – at least at particular moments along their life's way. Among the shady figures who did much to advance the story of salvation was Rahab. Rahab was actually a prostitute! She is a shining example of how the Lord uses whosoever He wills to accomplish His saving work.

All that to say, the folk named in the Genealogy today were just like you and me – or rather we are just like them! For, let's face it, we are all of us within ourselves something of as mixed a bag as the lineage of Jesus.

Perhaps – indeed, doubtlessly – something of the melange each one of us is within him or her self comes from our family histories, our physical lineage. But I think it can be argued that it also comes from the lineage of Jesus Christ mentioned this morning, for we are all *the spiritual descendants of Abraham*.

I find it consoling to think that Jesus – *God-made-man, God-with-us* – who came forth from the womb of the one whom we hail as the *Most Blessed Virgin Mary*, the *Virgin Most Pure* – was part of a mixed race as much as any of us are.

It is a truly remarkable thing that the Saviour of the World assumed the pitiful story of people of this world when He came to be with us to bring about our redemption. Remarkable and necessary! There is a patristic adage which states: *Jesus could not redeem what He did not assume*. To redeem our fallen race, Jesus needed to espouse our human condition. This is very clearly the teaching of the Scriptures and that of the Church. St Athanasius' little phrase just quoted about Jesus needing to assume what He came to redeem is one others have taken up and developed – among them another doctor of the Church, St Gregory Nazianzen. The Sacred Scriptures remind us that our Divine Redeemer espoused the human condition completely, *in every way, but sin*. Without sinning Himself, *Jesus took our sins upon Himself*. The Scriptures teach us that *Christ became sin for our sakes to put sin to death upon the cross*. What a mystery of love! Gregory Nazianzen, building upon Athanasius' statement, declares: *What has not been assumed has not been healed*. This explains Jesus becoming our kinsmen – if I can put it that way. It explains Christ taking upon Himself the brokenness and wounds, the sickness, the guilt and the shame which are part of all who share the human condition. Christ did this to bring us redemption, to bring us healing.

Jesus became our kinsman through the Blessed Virgin. Christ is *Son of God and Son of Mary*. He is the Son of God, born in the flesh from one of our race as our kinsman.

If Jesus became one of us this was so that we might become one with Him. He enables us to bring into our union with Him all that makes up our person. There is nothing in us that is a stranger to Jesus; nothing in us that is repulsive to Him; nothing in us that is rejected or occulted by Him. Again it is the Scriptures which affirm: *Jesus was not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters*. Isn't that just extraordinary? Jesus takes upon Himself not only what is great and good in us, not just what is splendid and glorious in humans – in you and me, but also what is broken and wounded, what stands in need of healing and redemption. The Lord willingly heals and forgives us, restores and renews us; He reintegrates us and makes us whole once more.

This is where the Family Tree of Jesus being made up just as it was is so important. It is so important for us – so liberating for us – to see that the Family Tree of the Son of God was far from perfect. Leaving aside the men – who were quite an assortment, let's just consider the women for a moment.

Before the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared on the scene there was Tamar who had been taken to be a prostitute by Judah (her father-in-law) who fathered her son Perez. There was also Salmon's wife, Rahab, a former prostitute who had been key to the story of God's People's entry into the Land of Promise. Her story is found in the Book of Joshua. She lived in Jericho and assisted the Israelites enter into the Promised Land, accepting to hide two men in the city. Then there was David's wife Bathsheba, an adulteress. She had been Uriah's wife whom David had manoeuvred to take for his own.

That Jesus' Family Tree – just our own family trees and our own personal lives – was made up of a melange, quite a mixed bunch indeed, offers us encouragement. It gives us hope. It shows us that what interests the Lord is not perfect pedigree, but that people allow Him to enter into the lives. Every heart can be opened by God's grace, no matter what a person has done. God is shown to use people who can and do make mistakes. The Lord's concern is not impeccability, but openness to grace.

I am convinced that it is those who have experienced God's grace who will be given the attitudes of heart required of them: the attitudes of gentleness and mercy which are so central to the Christian life. Mary experienced those graces in her sinless life. We experience them in our fallen, broken, wounded lives.

I see today's feast as offering us occasion to open our hearts afresh to God's love. I see the commemoration of Mary's Birthday as an occasion for us to be brought to life afresh; an occasion to be born anew, as it were, re-born to life in God's grace, restored to life in Christ. May all our lives be healed, restored, renewed. May the life of our Benedictine Congregation of St Mary of Monte Oliveto be given fresh impetus in all our communities throughout the world. May we be brought to new birth here are Rostrevor.

Amen!