

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD — ABC

READING I Nm 6:22-27

READING II Gal 4:4-7

GOSPEL Lk 2:16-21

The Blessing of Aaron is perhaps the most familiar passage in the relatively unfamiliar book of Numbers. It is a prayer for God to deal generously with individuals and/or peoples. This prayer may reach back into the twelfth century B.C. and be rooted in the experience of Moses, the man who spoke to God face to face. The setting is the sanctuary. The place where the Israelites are to present themselves three times a year and see the face of God.

The blessing proper is the three poetic lines (vv 24-26). Each line consists of two statements. The first invokes God's movement toward the person; The second invokes his activity on behalf of the person. The blessing is directed toward the individual (the singular, not the plural is used here) and therefore stresses the intimate nature of the activity. (Yet, the individual is still viewed as part of the larger worshipping community).

Each line repeats the name of Lord, indicating that the Lord himself grants the blessing. In the first line, the word 'bless' sums up all of God's gifts. This becomes concrete in "keep you." It is a prayer for God's protection in the midst of problems. In the second line, God's shining face reflects the friendly and benevolent presence of God. This is shown in God's graciousness and in his granting of favors to his people in need. In the third line, God's look of kindness expresses his nearness and concern. This is demonstrated in the gift of peace which is more than the cessation of hostilities. It is general well-being.

On the theological level, the blessing is, first of all, a movement away from the sanctuary to the concrete needs of God's people. Secondly, the blessing expresses God's providence: God continues to care for his people. Thirdly, the blessing looks to everyday happenings: It is not tied down to a few extraordinary events.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, written about 54 or 55 A.D., is a polemical letter in which he strongly warns against some Judaizers who want them to adopt certain Jewish practices. By "law", here Paul understands the entire Mosaic Law. For Paul, the Law, though holy, could not make a person right with God. A new intrinsic power was required because the "Law" was merely an extrinsic norm. When God's plan finally crystallized, God sent his Son so that we might become God's adoptive sons and daughters. Jesus' condition was human ("born of a woman" — Paul, like Mark, does not know of a virginal conception). Though Jesus was subject to the Law, Paul cautiously omits his circumcision. The presence of the Spirit proves that we are sons. The Spirit is that intrinsic power by

which we can cry out, "Abba." (An Aramaic word with all the intimate connotations of "Dad.") As a result, we are no longer slaves and are, therefore, free of the Law.

The Gospel passage is part of the larger construct of Luke's Infancy narrative (Lk 2:1-20). It concentrates on the reactions of the participants: (1) The shepherds; (2) The recipients of the shepherds' report; and (3) Mary. The scene closes with the departure of the shepherds. The circumcision and naming are an added note.

Once the shepherds see the baby in the manger, they understand the message of the angel. Israel, then, recognizes the manger of the Lord (Is 1:3). When they have completed their mission, the shepherds leave, glorifying and praising God. They are the first believers in Jesus. Luke notes that the recipients of the shepherds' report were astonished. Yet, these hearers do not cumulate these events in their hearts. By contrast, it is Mary who anxiously keeps all these events. She is presented as pondering the God given interpretation of these obscure happenings. For Luke, this is significant since Mary is the only one in the infancy narrative who will be the link to Jesus' public ministry. Mary, therefore, is set apart as the one who reflects in faith on the mystery yet to be revealed. Appropriately, Luke regards her as a believer and disciple.

In contrast to the Baptist's circumcision and naming, Jesus' circumcision and naming are parenthetical. Luke does not discuss the legal significance of the circumcision. Rather, the naming of the child "Jesus" serves to fulfill the angel's command.

To be Mary is to look beyond oneself. We tend to limit our horizons to ourselves. Our successes, our achievements, our "making it big" are too often events which touch no one but ourselves. We find it almost impossible to reach out because we have chosen to avoid the occasion. We lose the sense of mystery in our lives because mystery involves at least another. But to be Mary is to look beyond oneself.

Luke presents Mary as looking beyond herself. In the annunciation, she finds her identity by meeting the needs of God's people. She agrees to be the mother of the Messiah. In today's Gospel, she ponders the significance of the birth and its attendant circumstances. She looks for meaning and by so doing she looks beyond herself. In Luke, Mary is the link between the infancy narrative and the ministry of Jesus. In Acts 1:14 she is at prayer at the birth of the Christian Church. She looked beyond herself to the needs of others. To be Mary is to look beyond oneself.

To ponder the mystery of our lives is to look beyond oneself. Position, status, gifts, even pain and frustration, are not meant to isolate us within our own ego but to direct our gaze to the needs of others. To be a parent means to look after one's child or children. To be a supervisor means to reach out to subordinates. To be a leader means to look to those being led. To be Mary is to look beyond oneself.

Eucharist ponders the mystery of the man who looked beyond himself. (Given his mother, he did not fall far from the tree.) Eucharist envisions countless brothers and sisters who are to be the objects of our caring. Eucharist draws us from the seclusion of the sanctuary to the arena of life, where to be Mary is to look beyond ourselves.