

Homilies for January

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Homilies for January

Patrick Connolly

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

January 1

Num. 6:22-27. Gal. 4:4-7. Luke 2:16-21.

Has anyone asked you the question: how is it with you? Or have you ever found yourself looking quietly at a dear one and wondering: what is it really like inside his/her skin? These questions lead one to ponder what it was like to be inside Mary's skin, to feel her emotions. As a young woman, she gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth. They say it happened at Bethlehem. He began to grow up and she had the joys, the preoccupations, the moments of apprehension that all young mothers have. Then he moved into his teens and we recall the story of a disappearance to the Temple and its religious experts. We get a glimpse of her and Joseph's day of terror at their loss. How could he have done this to us? Why did he do it? Did he not realize . . . ?

And then he became a young man, a public figure quoting the Jewish scriptures Mary taught him as a child, saying, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me - he sent me to bring the good news to the poor.' We all enjoy the growth and achievements of our children. So did Mary, wouldn't you think? But this young man, her son, started to question the religious teachings and lifestyle of the Jewish establishment. Samaritans, religious outcasts according to his Jewish co-nationals, he presented as capable of being harbingers or agents of the Kingdom of God - truly religious. Prostitutes ranked among his friends. Lepers and other outcasts could approach without fear of dismissal.

'What kind of man is this?' was the response of many people. It could hardly have been a proud boast to have had to accept, or say that, 'I am the Nazarene's mother.' Not quite like being the mother of a bishop or a government minister. What do you think? Have we robbed Mary of the drama, the eventful story of her mothering the God-man Jesus? The holiness of the Annunciation scene we remember. The joy of the Nativity we gaze upon on Christmas card and crib. The sorrow and pain of his last earthly days in the Trial and Crucifixion we can identify with. We're all great for the

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high points and for remembering them. The in-between years, the years between Bethlehem and Calvary, the mothering years when Mary moved between different phases of womanhood and motherhood, the very years when her image of God must have been undone, reworked and reassembled as she painfully watched this son of hers – we have eclipsed. The fact is that these were the times which all mothers go through, when offspring grow in their parents' likeness and then assert their independence and unique identity, causing joy and real, if passing, pain to mother and father.

The story of those years between Bethlehem and Calvary must have much in common with the mothering experiences, the parenting experiences of all here today. Joy, achievement of manhood, but also the stigma of being the mother of this new prophet were Mary's emotions. Mary stuck by him, even to the Cross. Who among us have not known happiness, achievement but also accusation because of our children. In bearing Jesus of Nazareth, Mary had to endure the high and low points of all mothers, for this Jesus was God-incarnate, truly human and truly divine.

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 6

Is. 60:1-6. Eph. 3:2-3, 5-6. Mt. 2:1-12.

Maybe we are too familiar with the story of the wise men from the East who came to visit the infant Jesus. The visitors are called Magi which tells us that they probably belonged to the learned priestly caste of the Persians. Yet we are told nothing else about them: there is no mention of their names or the exact place that they travelled from. We don't know what they looked like. Artists often present the visit of the Magi in colourful and vivid pictures – we have all seen heart-warming pictures of bearded Magi in flowing robes worshipping the infant Saviour. These pictures help us to imagine the scene 2,000 years ago.

But today's gospel gives us no details about the Magi themselves; their lives are left in quiet obscurity. Isn't that strange? We hardly know anything about these famous men. After their return to their own country, we never hear of them again. In one sense this is amazing since these wise men are among the first people to worship the infant Son of God. If alive today, they could charge a fat fee for appearing on television chat shows. After all, these men had been there at the start! Why then the silence about the Magi in today's gospel? For the author of the gospel, there is one central point of the story of the wise men: Jesus is king and Messiah. No other details are allowed to distract us from the worship due to Christ. He is the focus of the story, so much so that we're not told even one of the Magi's names.

The Magi seek a king and Herod consults the religious experts of the Jews to find out where they should look. Of this there is no doubt; they should look in Bethlehem, not in Jerusalem. For Bethlehem is the place of King David's birth and the place of origin of the king Messiah of the future. And so to Bethlehem the wise men travel to pay homage to the new-born Messiah. The nameless Magi worship the infant king; they have achieved the purpose of their visit. These unknown wise men from the East are Gentiles and yet they are the first to publicly recognize the Lord. Today's feast, the Epiphany, celebrates the historically tangible invasion of the world by the personal God. The fact that Matthew, the author of the gospel, places foreigners at the scene of the nativity indicates something very important. Gentiles (i.e. foreigners) are the first to acknowledge Jesus Christ. The Lord is revealed as the Saviour, not of a particular race, but of all people. Salvation is not confined to any particular group; no longer can one race, the Jews, claim to be sole recipient of God's favour. As St Paul tells us in the second reading: ' . . . pagans now share the same inheritance . . . the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.' None of us can maintain that we have the whole truth; God cannot be monopolized by anyone. The message is clear if we care to face it: I must avoid any talk which has echoes of triumphalism. The Lord often works through people in ways that I cannot fathom. After all, what Jew would have expected three unknown nameless strangers from the East to be the first people to worship the new Messiah?

The Baptism of the Lord

January 8

Is. 42:1-6, 6-7. Acts 10:34-38. Luke 3:15-16, 21-22.

Did you ever hear of Pompeii? You might have if you have an interest in archaeology or ancient history. It was once a very important and prosperous city in the Roman Empire, around the time that Christ lived. One day it was very suddenly destroyed by a massive volcanic eruption. Tons of red-hot lava from Vesuvius flowed down into the city, killing thousands of people as they attempted to flee the boiling liquid. This happened on an ordinary day in the life of a busy city. The lava solidified, freezing all of city life as it was on that bright afternoon in the first century A.D. Archaeologists and historians were able to excavate the buildings which told them much about city life nearly 2,000 years ago. Near Pompeii lay a small town also destroyed that fateful day. It had no beautiful buildings and consisted mostly of ordinary housing. Yet it tells us a lot about how ordinary people lived. In one house, archaeologists found a small cross embedded in the wall of a room on the second floor. A historian can look at that cross as among

the earliest evidence of Christianity in the Roman Empire. An unknown Christian lived here in a largely pagan and hostile environment. Believers in Christ were far from common; often they were persecuted. Christians were a small minority, there was perhaps only a handful in the whole town. For the Christian living in that small room, his/her baptism was a very real commitment. Baptism, entrance into the Church, was a major decision for those early followers of Christ. It was a decision which shaped their whole lives.

For Jesus, too, baptism is a moment of decision. Often in Luke's gospel, Jesus is portrayed at prayer before important decisions. Baptism is a crucial decision, and so prayer is an important part of it. As he begins his public ministry, Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit comes down upon him: God's favour rests upon him. Of course, Jesus, the sinless one, did not *have* to be baptized. But he didn't hesitate to identify with us sinners, and so he was baptized by John. For Jesus, it was an important start to his preaching and ministry. It was a crucial decision, like that of the early persecuted Christians.

It is in this light that we might think of our own baptism. When we were babies, our parents made our baptismal promises for us. At baptism, I became a member of the people of God, the Church. This decision is an on-going one, a commitment to try to grow in my faith. Baptism is not something that merely happened years ago; it is a decision which must be renewed daily, a decision to follow Jesus Christ. This is no trivial matter. My baptism entails a real commitment to model my life on the example of the Lord. For Jesus himself, baptism involved decision. The early Christians knew that baptism meant a whole way of life. It was not a thing taken lightly; indeed for some of them it involved martyrdom. The fact of baptism dominated the rest of their lives. It cannot be any different for us.

Second Sunday of the Year

January 15

Is. 62:1-5. 1 Cor. 12:4-11. Jn. 2:1-12

Sometime before Christmas, in November, there is usually a bit of a stir in the papers or on television about the arrival of *Beaujolais Nouveau*. There is some excitement about the new wine, this year's vintage. The wine trade makes a fuss about the quality of the new arrival; wine columns in serious newspapers devote much ink to their new subject. Of course, most of it is hype designed to boost the producers' bank balances in time for Christmas. Yet there seems to be a difference between good and bad wine. One reads that the new *Beaujolais* ought to be intensely juicy, a fruity and gulpable wine with a rich purply-red wine colour and an aroma you could

pick up at half a mile. Too often, though, the connoisseurs inform us, it is thin, flat and acidic stuff that is not worth waiting for. And so wine buffs spend much time discussing the relative merits of this year's product and whether it matches last year's *Beaujolais*. When we hear today's gospel, we realize that there were wine experts in Jesus' time also. They may not have spent the inordinate amount of time that our contemporary experts expend on the subject, but the steward in the Cana story certainly knew the difference between good and bad wine. Testimony is given to the excellence of the new wine created by Jesus by a person who is ignorant of its origin and therefore subject to no suggestion. The steward asserts that this wine is of the highest quality; he is an independent judge. So when the Lord gives, the gift is clearly of the highest standard.

Christ was a man who was obviously generous. There is no mention of a wedding present in today's gospel story, but when Our Lord's hosts get into a spot of trouble, he helps them by providing a high-quality wine. Did you notice in the story that it is through Mary's intercession that he intervenes? Mary's observation to the Lord is not exactly a request for a miracle, but evidently she is counting on the resourcefulness of her Son. Jesus reminds his mother that the time of his glorification (his death and resurrection) has not yet arrived: 'My hour has not come yet.' This, of course, is not a refusal, as Mary tells the servants to do what he tells them and her petition is granted. The Lord responds generously to his mother's asking his assistance.

The gospel-writer John mentions at the end of the Cana story that the miracle of water made into wine was the first one of Jesus' signs. It is called a sign not merely because it was worked to encourage belief, though it is this, but also because it signifies Christ for what he really is. The miracle at Cana illustrates his true character: he is a person who listens carefully and gives generously. The newly-married couple are not let down – the wine given to them is first quality. The Lord doesn't stint when we have the courage to approach him.

Third Sunday of the Year

January 22

Neh. 8:2-6, 8-10. 1 Cor. 12:12-30. Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21.

Many families keep photo albums. Perhaps you have one at home, or certainly you have seen one somewhere. Important events in the life of the family are visually recorded; snap-shots of past occasions such as baptism, first holy communion or confirmation recall high-points of our growth into adulthood. More mundane happenings such as a trip to the sea-side or a visit by far-away cousins can be found in such an album. Grinning boys in shorts and pretty little girls stare out from the rows of photos. Often looking through such

a collection of snaps can be both nostalgic and amusing. We can laugh at the fashions of previous years; a boy with big shirt-collar lapels and bell-bottom trousers can bring a wry smile. Many people treasure their photo album; it records things which are important to them. Photos of births and marriages remind us of happy occasions long past; sad events are remembered too, along with pictures of children when they were young. People put a value on such snaps because it gives them a sense of their past, both happy and sad. They want to carry away from family events something to remind them of it in the future, and so they store away these photos.

The disciples who lived with Jesus, and later on those who heard of and believed in him, also recorded something which was very important to them. Their experience shaped their whole lives and they wanted to retain this memory in some form. So they wrote gospels, the stories of the life of Jesus Christ. Nowadays we keep snap-shots mainly for family interest, recording events which are personally important to us. The early followers of Jesus Christ wanted to keep his memory alive not just because he had made a great impact on them personally, but also so that other people could hear about his life and message. At the beginning of today's gospel, Luke starts his account of the Lord's life by explaining his reason for writing. Luke writes so that those who have had Christ preached to them may learn that this preaching is well-founded. Luke insists that what he is writing about has really happened. He addresses his gospel to Theophilus, a man about whom we know little except he was probably a high-ranking government official and a prominent Christian. Luke intends his gospel to be at the service of the entire Church, so that many more people can hear about Jesus Christ. Luke firmly believes that the Saviour has arrived to bring good news to the poor, and thus Luke has drawn up an orderly account of the important events and sayings of Jesus' life.

When we want to remember past family occasions, we flick through our snap-shots. These photos give us a sense of what happened – a vivid impression which jumps up at us from the photographs. The gospels are not simply photographic accounts of Christ's life; they are much more important. They enable us to share the experience of the early disciples; that is why they were written, to enable us to realize that Jesus Christ is not just a memory, but that he is living among us today. If I am a follower of Jesus Christ, the events and sayings of his life must be very important to me. I can learn about these by reading the gospels which will give me a vivid sense of who Jesus Christ is. If I really want to know Christ, there is no other substitute.

Fourth Sunday of the Year*January 29*

Jer. 1:4-5, 17-19. 1 Cor. 12:31-13:13. Luke 4:21-30.

The public mood is often fickle. Opinion polls often trace the swiftly-changing views of the people in election time. Do you remember early last summer after the American Democratic party had nominated Michael Dukakis as its presidential candidate? Pollsters told us that he was seventeen points ahead of the Republican nominee George Bush. Yet within two months Dukakis was trailing Bush, the man who subsequently won the election. There was much talk of negative advertising. What is certain, however, is that public opinion is difficult to gauge and is subject to huge swings. You can never be completely sure which way the public will react.

In today's gospel, Jesus himself experienced an abrupt change in the public attitude towards him. Luke tells that when Jesus spoke first in the synagogue, the Nazarenes were astonished and full of admiration at the charm and eloquence of Jesus. He tells them of the power of the Word of God and his listeners are impressed with his gracious preaching. Yet he soon feels a rapid change in the mood of the people. Is this not Joseph's son? After his miracles in the other city of Galilee, Capernaum, the inhabitants of Nazareth want to see some miracles, though they lack faith. They get angry when Jesus tells them that a prophet is never accepted in his own country and that God's love is not confined to the Jews. Christ reminds them that God has shown his favour to foreigners in the past, a Sidonian widow and the Syrian Naaman are mentioned. These Gentiles may not be as worthy as the Jews, but God in his mercy has chosen them as his own. When Jesus' listeners heard this, they were completely enraged and hustled him out of the town intending to kill him. Yet at the end, there is another crucial swing in the Nazarene attitude: at the decisive moment nobody dared to molest him and Jesus walks away. Another spasmodic change in public mood saves Jesus' life.

Politicians are very aware of the quick-shifting trends in public opinion. As we see in today's gospel, the Lord too faced lightning changes in the people's attitude towards him. Unlike those seeking election, Christ was not interested in keeping the public happy. He was not in the popularity game; he had come to preach the good news regardless of how well received it would be. It is good to know that Jesus Christ experienced unpopularity, because if we wish to truly follow him, there will be times when not everybody will be clapping us on the back.