

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God
January 1, 2011

Why begin the New Year with Our Lady? Because with Our Lady the New Year of Christianity began. At the simple yes of a Jewish girl. A yes to God that changed all of history. A yes to God that Mary would continue to murmur all her life: a yes when her Son left her, a yes even when her neighbors rejected him, a yes to his three years of ministry, a yes to his crucifixion, a yes when he left this earth to return to his Father.

That is why the mother of Jesus has come down through Catholic tradition as the model believer, the model woman of faith. Mary is Jesus' first disciple, the perfect example of what it means to believe, to follow Jesus, to say yes to our Lord. Never forget those startling words of Jesus, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." She above all others heard the word of God and did it, listened to her Lord speaking and acted on it.

Where do you and I hear God, hear Christ, speaking to us? In the liturgy, every Eucharist, this Eucharist. Recall what the Second Vatican Council declared: Christ "is present in his word, because it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church." Spoken to you, spoken to me. Expecting a response. And we do respond. When the lector declares, "The Word of the Lord," we exclaim, "Thanks be to God!" We mean, "Yes, yes. So it is. This is indeed God speaking. Speaking to me."

That yes can be dangerous – if I am listening as Mary listened. Am I actually listening when Jesus declares that on Judgment Day he will say to some, "Come, inherit the kingdom. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Does it get through to me that my relationship to Christ depends on my relationship to the less fortunate: to the poor, to the hungry, to the immigrant's children denied healthcare, to the sick and lonely in our parish, to the several thousand on death row across the country?

I cannot tell you exactly what God is asking of any one of you when you hear God speaking. I do know that, like Mary after the shepherds left the stable, you too have to “treasure” what you hear, “ponder” it in your heart. You too may be puzzled, have to ask questions, have to think hard thoughts. But most importantly for this new year, resolve to listen to God’s Word. Old Testament and New, as Mary listened, aware that it is God who is talking to you. And when you discover what it means for you, what God is asking of you, have the graced strength to answer, “Here I am, Lord, your servant. Let it happen to me as you say.”

Finally, just one more point. In recent years, today, the first day of the new year, has been designated World Day of Peace. It is very appropriate because today’s gospel story is filled with a beautiful peace. In fact, it was in response to the angels’ song, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth,” that the shepherds had gone in search of the baby in the manger. On this day, Pope Benedict asks all of us to pray for peace and to work for peace. There are too many places in the world today where there is violence and conflict. Untold millions of innocent people are the victims.

But, when we think of peace, we should not just think of the conflicts which make headlines in our newspapers. Conflict on a wide scale happens because of the conflicts on the small scale: in single nations, in single communities, in neighborhoods and within families. We may not be able to do much about peace in Iraq or Afghanistan, but we can all do something about peace in our immediate surroundings.

All of us need to be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation. We can all be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” As the song tellingly says, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” We could hardly make a better resolution at the beginning of this new year.

Paul A. Magnano
Pastor