

NEW YEARS DAY - YEAR C (Homily 02)
“Journey into the Deeper Meaning of Christmas”
(Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21)

New Years Day is traditionally a time for a new start, a new beginning, a making of resolutions that gives fresh energy to make a change, to bring about some improvement in our lives and the lives of others. It is also a time for blessings, for prayer that God’s love and grace might be lavishly given on us to make this year even better than the last.

The Word of God proclaimed today speaks first of all through Moses of a blessing that will very interestingly place God’s name on the Israelites. The Gospel recounts the familiar story of the shepherds and Mary’s role in their visit to the Christ Child. The second reading then explores through Paul the deeper meaning of all these realities. Taken as a whole, these readings take us on a journey into the deeper meaning of Christmas.

According to the New Jerusalem Bible, the Nazarite vow is to leave the hair uncut, to take no strong drink and to never touch a corpse. The hair symbolized strength. Uncut it showed a desire to allow God’s power to operate within. The abstention from drink was a refusal of a life of ease, and not touching a body showed a special belonging to God. The triple invocation of God’s name in the blessing assured Israel of God’s protection.

This first reading ends with a very interesting and striking comment: So they shall put my name upon the Israelites and I will bless them. This comment brings to mind the naming ceremony of the First Nations in which an elder prays for 13 days to God our creator for the appropriate name to give a newborn child. This prayer connects with the 13 poles of the tepee and the teachings that go with each pole.

Christian baptism could and should involve that kind of process for naming a child – not out of a book or after a movie star, but rather involving the Catholic elders (grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles, retired priests and religious) who should be given that role and take it much more seriously than we do at present. Our prayer for a name for that child could even involve the saints, the relatives of this child who have passed away.

God wants to put God's own name on the Israelites, to truly make them God's people, a people who will live out their lives as a reflection of who God is as compassion, forgiveness and love. If that is so, then certainly God wants to put God's own name on our children, and we should spare no effort to involve the physical and the mystical Church in naming this child and surrounding it with love and prayer that will be a source of dignity and self worth for this child.

To bless someone is to speak well of that person (*benedicere*), to affirm that person. That must be our vocation and our baptismal calling, to be a blessing, a positive influence on others, a source of encouragement and confidence and well-being for others, and that could and should start with the naming of a child.

The Gospel then provides the imaginative, poetic, romantic aspect of the birth of Christ through the familiar and beloved story of the shepherds in the fields and their visit to Bethlehem. Mary is portrayed in this story as one who prays, who meditates, who contemplates and ponders the marvellous works of God through her and through her newborn child Jesus. She is a model for us, inviting us to do the same, something that we are doing right now in this celebration.

In a style that is just the opposite of the gospel, Paul in his letter to the Galatians plunges into an intense and concise theological explanation of the Christ event that is, in its own way, just as captivating an account as the gospel. For Paul, the birth of Christ is a cosmic event, seen as the fullness of time.

The fall of our first parents wounded this world and the universe, putting it into slavery to elemental forces of darkness symbolized by the need for the Law. Jesus, born of a woman, and under the Law, has redeemed us. He has taken us out of that sphere of slavery to rules, obligations, regulations, fear and anxiety, and placed us, adopted us, into a totally new relationship with God, a father-child relationship of love, familial bonding, freedom from reliance on the Law, and especially a Spirit-filled intimacy with God as our Father, our Abba, our daddy.

This truth for Paul is a new creation, a cosmic quantum leap into a new world view, spiritually won for all but experienced only by those who freely believe and accept this new reality into their lives and hearts. And that is

what Paul spent the rest of his life trying to explain to the world, a world that still struggles to accept this freely given, grace-filled reign of God. How fortunate we are to believe, and to be here today to celebrate this new reality at the beginning of a new calendar year.

Here are a few inspiring thoughts to ponder as we begin this New Year:

“You will never be sorry... for thinking before acting; for hearing before judging; for forgiving your enemies; for helping a fallen brother; for being honest in business; for standing by your principles; for stopping your ears to gossip; for bridling a slanderous tongue; for harboring only pure thoughts; for sympathizing with the afflicted; for being courteous to all.”

The Eucharist we celebrate now is what, along with baptism, put God’s name on us, and initiated us into the Church. The Jesus who was placed in a manger at birth is now placed on the altar to heal us. And as we listen to God’s Word and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, let us do so with Paul’s teachings of freedom, adoption into God’s family with God as our Abba, in mind.

Above all, let us make the gift of this New Year a journey into the deeper meaning of Christmas, and live it in our lives with profound peace and joy. Happy New Year!