

Sermon: ADVENT 4, December 20, 2015

In the Name...

There was once a newly ordained priest who was very devout and spiritual, but, he had one major failing. He was terrified of public speaking and his first few sermons were disastrous because he kept fainting. One day, his rector took him aside and said, "Look, your problem is that you start off too tense. Next Sunday is Advent 4 and the Gospel focuses on the Blessed Virgin Mary. So, when you get up in the pulpit, start by announcing, "I'm in love with another man's wife" – then pause, smile, and then say "and her name is the Virgin Mary." Then, everybody will laugh, you'll be relaxed, and you should do better."

Well, the Sunday came. The young priest got into the pulpit and looked over the congregation. He grew short of breath, the room began to swim before his eyes, the colour drained from his face, but, before he fainted he managed to shout out, "The rector is in love with another man's wife. And I can't remember her name."

Today, we stand on the doorstep of Christmas. The Advent season is almost at an end. Prominent in our readings these past weeks has been the figure of John the Baptist and today, the Blessed Virgin Mary – two of the only three people whose birthdays we celebrate in the Church calendar.

Did you know that? When we speak of St. Patrick's Day or St. Francis' Day we're talking about the day they died and started a new life in Heaven. But, there are three people whose earthly, physical birthdays we celebrate, as well. Obviously, one of those is Jesus, December the 25th, and, on June 24th we celebrate his cousin John the Baptist's birthday and on September 8th, the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

So, why are Mary and John singled out in this way? Because the Early Church felt a great need to prove that Jesus was a real person and part of a real family. You need to remember that pagan religion was all about myths and legends. That's why the Gospels have those elaborate lists of Jesus' ancestors. That's why so much care is given to mentioning contemporary people, like Caesar Augustus and Pontius Pilate. In those days people were used to hearing stories about gods and goddesses like Zeus and Apollo, Isis and Ishtar, and those stories were neat, but, didn't mean anything to real life. On the other hand, a central message of the Christian religion is that God Himself dwelt among us in real life and that means everything.

When the Early Church fixed a date to celebrate Christ's birth it was actually settling a major three-way dispute. One group had taken the view that Jesus was an inspired man, a wonderful teacher, and his disciples had made up some amazing stories about him healing lepers, changing water into wine, and even a virgin birth in order to reinforce his teachings. But, those were just stories and he was only human. On the other hand, another group said that Jesus wasn't a real person at all. He was a divine spirit who had made himself look like a human and, yes, he did heal lepers and raise the dead and walk on water, but, he wasn't born - of a virgin or anyone else. He was only a spirit.

The third group, however, said that Jesus was both - true God and true Man - the Second Person of the Holy Trinity incarnate, really born of the real Virgin Mary. And they're the ones who pushed for Christmas to be observed. So, what we celebrate at Christmas is not the joy of giving, or hope for a better year, but, the reality of God on earth.

And that is why the Church has historically made so much of Mary, because without understanding her, we cannot begin to understand Jesus. The two go together which is why Mary has been given various titles which teach us about her and her son.

One of the oldest is the Greek title Theotokos which translates in English as "God-Bearer", one who gives birth to God. It's sometimes translated "Mother of God" and it was first used in the 2nd Century, so, it goes right back to the Apostles' time.

What it means is that when we call Mary the Theotokos, the Mother of God, we are making a powerful statement about Jesus, because a human cannot be God, and a spirit can have no mother. So, with literally one word, two false ideas about Jesus are put to rest.

Another traditional title for Mary is the Second Eve. To grasp this we need to think back to the first Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve listened to an evil angel, Satan, and thus brought shortness of life and the tragedy of death into the human experience. Mary, on the other hand, also listened to an angel, but, this one was Gabriel and, as a result, she transformed the human experience into one which could conquer death and enjoy eternal life.

Eve said "No" to God; Mary said "Yes." Eve was the mother of the mortal human race. Mary became the mother of an immortal human race. Mary was not merely the physical means of Christ's birth; she was the spiritual cause of it. Without her "Yes", without her faith and obedience, there would be no Christmas, no Good Friday, no Easter, no Pentecost. She really is our mother in heaven.

And a third title is Ark of the New Covenant. Again, this takes us back to the Old Testament and Indiana Jones. Well, the Old Testament, anyway. The Ark which Moses built was a container, a wooden box, and it held three things. The stone tablets with the Ten Commandments; a jar of the manna from the Exodus; and the baton of Aaron the priest. The Ark of the Old Covenant, then, contained symbols of God's presence and interaction with His people.

Now, when we call Mary the Ark of the New Covenant we are saying that she also was a container, but, of flesh, not wood, and that contained within her during her pregnancy were not merely physical symbols, but, the spiritual reality they represented. Not merely a symbol of Law, but, the Law-giver in person. Not merely a symbol of priesthood, but, the Great High Priest himself. Not merely a symbol of heavenly food, but, the Bread of Heaven who feeds us with his flesh in every Eucharist. God, close up and personal as never before.

Theotokos, Second Eve, Ark of the New Covenant. And there are many more titles all with the same purpose - to teach us about Jesus.

Christmas is a good time to reflect upon Mary, to remind ourselves of her relationship to God and her relationship to us. All generations have, indeed, called her blessed. Yes, she is another man's wife, but, the pastor loves her and hopes that you do too. And that none of us ever forget her name.

In the Name...