

MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

The Lord conveys his blessing through elegant repetition and warm, song-like words.

Israelite = IZ-ree-uh-lit or IZ-ray-uh-lit

Emphasize "the Lord" as the source of the blessing, as well as the fruits of the blessing itself.

Pause after the word "peace" to show how the text returns to God's direction to Moses.

For meditation and context:

LECTIONARY #18

READING I Numbers 6:22-27

A reading from the Book of Numbers

The LORD said to Moses:

"Speak to **Aaron** and his **sons** and tell them:

This is how you shall bless the **Israelites**.

Say to them:

The **LORD** **ble**ss you and **keep** you!

The **LORD** let his face **shine** upon you, and be **gracious** to you!

The **LORD** look upon you **kindly** and give you **peace**!

So shall they invoke **my name** upon the Israelites, and **I will bless them.**"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8 (2a)

R. May God bless us in his mercy.

May God have pity on us and bless us;
may he let his face shine upon us.
So may your way be known upon earth;
among all nations, your salvation.

May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you!
May God bless us,
and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

May the nations be glad and exult
because you rule the peoples in equity;
the nations on the earth you guide.

READING I

Today's solemnity celebrates our ancient belief in Jesus' fully human and fully divine nature by proclaiming Mary as the mother of God. Throughout history, this date has been the occasion of many celebrations, including the circumcision of the Lord, the World Day of Prayer for Peace (still observed by the Church on this day) and, of course, the first day of the calendar year. The many meanings given to the day, as well as its role in concluding the octave of Christmas, are evident in today's readings.

The Book of Numbers is best known for its account of Israel's forty rebellious years of wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt and entering into the covenant with God at Sinai. Prior to the account of the journey, the priestly writers who compiled and composed the book included some initial traditions regarding purity issues, judicial matters, and legislation regarding vows and the Nazirites. Among those texts is today's reading. This "priestly blessing," which likely originally followed the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests in Leviticus 9:22-23, reflects the

duty and privilege of Aaronide priests to facilitate blessings over Israel and its people.

In Israel, to bless (*bārak* in Hebrew) or call for a blessing (*barākāh*) is not to invoke some abstract state of mind or spiritual condition. Rather, it asks the Lord to respond with a substantial gift or material benefit, such as children, material well-being, and peace. This can be seen in today's three-fold invocation. The first asks for safety and security from the enemy. The second invokes the benevolence and graciousness of God's face. The third is an

Galatians = guh-LAY-shuhnz

Paul's words here communicate prophecy fulfilled and liberation realized. The reading is short, with Paul's typical elaborate structure, but its argument is just this simple.

All the persons of the Trinity are present here: Father, Son, and Spirit. Emphasize these words as you read, to show the relationship into which we have been adopted.

Bring the excited energy of the shepherds to your proclamation.

The shepherds are evangelists, sharing their amazement at the Good News with Mary and Joseph.

Pause for just a half beat after the word "Mary" before you read the rest of this sentence, which is a quiet, sober insertion into this otherwise active, vibrant reading.

Pause before this final sentence. Mary and Joseph continue to act in obedience to God's instructions.

explicit appeal for well-being. The final statement recalls that while the priests call upon God's name, it is God who blesses. As such, it is an appropriate thought for a day that prays for peace in the world and reminds us of the peace brought about by the incarnation of Christ.

READING II As in so many of his letters, Paul's letter to the Galatians battles outsiders who tried to add to or change his basic Gospel message. Against those who promoted the Jewish law and circumcision as integral to faith in Christ,

READING II Galatians 4:4-7

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians

Brothers and sisters:

When the **fullness of time** had come, **God sent his Son**,
born of a **woman**, born under the **law**,
to **ransom** those under the law,
so that we might receive **adoption** as sons.

As **proof** that you **are** sons,
God sent the Spirit of his Son into our **hearts**,
crying out, "**Abba, Father!**"

So you are **no longer** a slave but a **son**,
and if a **son** then also an **heir**, through **God**.

GOSPEL Luke 2:16-21

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

The shepherds went in **haste** to Bethlehem and found **Mary**
and **Joseph**,
and the **infant** lying in the manger.

When they saw this,
they made **known** the message
that had been told them about **this child**.

All who heard it were **amazed**
by what had been told them by the shepherds.

And **Mary kept all** these things,
reflecting on them in her **heart**.

Then the shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God
for all they had **heard and seen**,
just as it had been told to them.

When **eight days** were completed for his circumcision,
he was named **Jesus**, the name given him by the **angel**
before he was conceived in the **womb**.

Paul assured the Galatians that they were adopted into the family of God apart from the law.

Noting that their adoption is part of God's final plan (in the "fullness of time"), Paul identifies God's Son as the one responsible for ransoming the Jews ("those under the law") so that adoption would be available for all. The result is that all move from slavery to being sons and daughters and to being heirs who, inspired by the Spirit, can call God their father.

GOSPEL

Today's Gospel repeats the Gospel of the Christmas Mass at Dawn and completes it. Starting with the report from the shepherds, which leaves all in amazement and Mary in contemplation, the text concludes by commenting on the piety and religious fervor of Jesus' family. Through his circumcision and naming, Jesus' parents lovingly observe Israel's traditions and the directive of the angel. In addition, the account yet again follows Luke's pattern of comparing Jesus to John the Baptist (see Luke 1:59). S.L.