

## **New Year's Day (Jan. 1, 2012)**

This Feast has so many names. Traditionally it was the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Then among Jesuits it has always been honored as the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus and is the titular feast of our Society which bears his name. And most recently it was changed from a Feast of Jesus to a Feast of Mary under her most exalted title, that of Mother of God. And then too it has been designated as World Day of Peace, which can seem somewhat ironic given the situation of the world we live in.

In our devotion to Mary we sometimes tend to forget that she was first of all a Jewish woman of faith. She had been nurtured by the law and the prophets the same as any other good and pious Jew of her time. She heard the exhortations to care for the poor, the orphans, and the aliens. I can easily imagine her passing her deep Jewish piety on to her son and so enabling him to preach and teach much of what he did from his own knowledge of their Scriptures. Jesus' obvious acquaintance with current Jewish customs must have been learned from his mother. Together they lit the Sabbath candles and celebrated the great Feast Days.

She lived in a rural village whose population consisted largely of peasants working the land and craftsmen who served their basic needs. Her husband Joseph was one of those craftsmen. Under Roman dominance, times were difficult; revolutionary resistance made the atmosphere tense; violence and poverty prevailed. It was probably not too much different from conditions in her country today.

As a pious Jewish woman Mary was acquainted with those beautiful Messianic oracles of the prophet Isaiah that are so much a part of our Advent liturgies, those promises of universal peace when the Messiah comes. There would be no more war, God said through the prophet, not even preparation for war. Might she have dreamed that her son would be the one to bring about this much needed and much desired state of peace?

Luke in his Gospel tells us that angels heralded the birth of Jesus by singing, "Peace on earth." But Matthew, perhaps more realistically, reminds us that Jesus was born into a world of violence as he tells the story of the massacre of the Holy Innocents. Two thousand years later we

unfortunately are still longing for the day when nations will lay down arms and all people will live together in mutual good will and respect and love. Some people might be tempted to think that because the peace foretold by the prophets did not happen when Jesus was born, perhaps he was not the promised Messiah after all. Our faith of course, like Mary's, continues to assure us that he is. St. Paul tells us that he who is our peace has made us all one. The problem is that people get in the way. On this New Year's Day, 2012, as we celebrate Mary as the Mother of God, we should remember that she is also the Queen of Peace and perhaps speak of today more as a World Day of Prayer for Peace and besiege heaven with our petitions that God's dream revealed of old through the prophets and come to birth in the son of Mary might come to fulfillment in our time.

If this is to happen, of course, it means that the hearts of men and women must change. We must all become instruments of peace in our families, in our cities, in our nations. And our earnest prayer must be that the heads of nations find some way other than war to resolve international differences. St. Francis's prayer for peace is entirely appropriate today, but also every day. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. Then we truly would have a happy new year.