

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD 1st January

This feast is celebrated each year on the octave day of Christmas. In the gospel reading after the departure of the shepherds we hear how Mary treasured the words of the angel as reported by the shepherds 'and pondered them in her heart.' The first reading is a blessing for Israel's protection and the second reading speaks of God sending his Son so that we could become sons of God.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Numbers the fourth book of the Jewish Law which resumes the account of the desert journey. A census, regarded as an act of religious significance, is taken, ch.1-4, and presents Israel as a sacred community already fully formed and organized with the Levites, the priestly tribe, at the very heart of the community. There follows the offering of gifts on the occasion of the dedication of the altar which offerings form a prelude to departure from Sinai. The second Passover is celebrated and leaving the holy mountain the people after various halts reach Kadesh. From here unsuccessful attempts are made to enter Canaan from the south and after a long stay the Israelites resume their journey and come to the Plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. The Midianites are defeated and along with details of the journey are written groups of laws either supplementing the Siniatic code or preparing for the colonization of Canaan.

The reading, 6,22-27, is in the form of a blessing given by God to Moses before the Israelites resume their journey. It is a Semitic way of expressing divine favour the thrice invoked divine name assures Israel of God's protective presence on their journey.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 66.2-3,5-6,8, is a song which was sung at harvest time. Reference to the harvest is omitted and for us it is a song seeking God's protection and calling on all nations to 'rejoice and sing for joy' because God (this Son of Mary's) will guide the nations on the earth.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatia was part of central Turkey and Paul preached in the southern tip of Galatia on his first missionary journey and he passed through northern Galatia on his second and third missionary journeys. It is uncertain where the letter was written, Ephesus or Macedonia, and when, possibly about the year 57. In the letter, after his introduction, Paul gives an account of his conversion and his meeting in Jerusalem with the elders of the Church which brings out the main point of this letter. After preaching the Risen Christ to the Galatians and bringing them into the Church some Judaisers, that is, those who held that the Old Law and its practises should not be abandoned, unsettled the Galatians in their new found faith. Paul says to the Galatians that they are stupid people and someone has put a spell on them. Abraham put his faith in God which made him righteous in the sight of God, yet he lived many years before the Law given to Moses. It is not keeping the Law which brings righteousness but faith and for the Galatians it is their faith in Jesus Christ. The Israelites were slaves under the Law but Christ by his death has released them from slavery and enabled them to become adopted sons of God. Paul concludes his letter with an exhortation on Christian liberty and love, kindness and perseverance.

The reading, 4.4-7, begins with 'When t he appointed time came' that is the coming of the messianic era which completes the long wait of the preceding centuries. When that time came God sent his Son 'to redeem the subjects of the Law. Paul is speaking to Jewish converts. There are two aspects of redemption first of all freedom from slavery to the Law or for us freedom from slavery to sin and secondly adoption as sons. This adoption is a real gift of new life in which all three persons of the Trinity are involved. It is the Father who gives us the new life, it is the Son who has won this life for us and it is the Spirit of the Son 'that cries, "Abba Father" and it is this that makes you a son' so no longer a slave but an heir to a new life in God. This is what the motherhood of Mary has made possible. The new life in her has enabled us to gain new life in God.