

Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday, January 1st, 2021

Dear friends,

“Glad tidings I bring to you and your kin” for a New Year filled with hope and good health.



Today the Roman Rite of the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God. Byzantine and Syriac Rites celebrate this feast on December 26, and Coptic Christians on January 16th. For our Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran brothers and sisters, this day continues to be the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, a name which older Roman Catholics will remember.

Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Letter *Marialis Cultus* wrote: "This celebration, placed on January 1 ...is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation. It is meant also to exalt the singular dignity which this mystery brings to the 'holy Mother...through whom we were found worthy to receive the Author of life.' It is likewise a fitting occasion for renewing adoration of the newborn Prince of Peace, for listening once more to the glad tidings of the angels (cf. Lk. 2:14), and for imploring from God, through the Queen of Peace, the supreme gift of peace."¹

Mary's identity as the Mother of God is held by, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic churches, who consider her the “Theotokos” – literally, “God-bearer”. Many other Christian traditions give her considerably less veneration, recognising only her role in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus. They indicate the lack of attention to Mary in the Bible as their reasoning. Interestingly, Mary (Maryam ibnat Imran, mother of Isa – Jesus), is the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an, where her name occurs seventy times; she is called the greatest of all women and the nineteenth Surah is titled “Maryam”.



"Maryam daughter of Imrān" in Islamic calligraphy

The Second Council of Nicaea affirmed that Mary was worthy of a higher level of devotion (hyperdulia) than the other saints (dulia) and that only God should be worshipped (latria). Appeals to Mary are for her to intercede with her son in response our prayers and are a call to her maternal love of us all.

¹ https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus_en.html

The observance of the Octave of Christmas is very much an acknowledgement of the Jewish heritage into which Jesus was born: the ritual circumcision of all male infants on the eighth day after birth was instituted – it is believed – in the 6th Century BCE during the Babylonian Exile as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. Originally, the practice was a nick or cut into the foreskin, known as the Brit Milah and it was not until the 2nd Century CE that Jewish Rabbinical leaders introduced and mandated the more radical Brit Periah which more closely resembles the circumcision which was almost routinely practised in many western



cultures until recent years. The Jewish religious ceremony is performed by a Mohel in the presence of (often only male) family members of the baby on the eighth day after birth. For most Christians, baptism is considered to replace circumcision, a decision reached at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE; although James the Just, an early leader of the Church in Jerusalem, as a strong defender of the Jewish foundations of Christianity defended circumcision as one of the rites of passage into Christian life, St Paul decreed that it was not required of Gentile converts.

As we anticipate the Christmas celebration (on January 7) of our friends who follow the Julian Calendar, many of us welcome the reminder that Christmas – like Easter – is a Christian season and not just a day. Most of us are familiar with the concept of the twelve days of Christmas; however, a well-established older church tradition saw the Christmas season as ending on Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, on February 2nd. In some Churches this is the season of Epiphany – or Epiphanytide. Many religious communities still hold to this and traditionally the Christmas crèche or nativity scene is left up until Candlemas day. Continuing to enjoy carols and some Christmas practices may help get us through the dark weeks of the new calendar year. Food is often a part of the celebrations and “Kings’ Cake” is eaten in many countries at Epiphany, with a bean or other token hidden inside which entitles the finder to be “king for a day”.



May we all appreciate the royalty given to us in our baptism. Happy New Year!

Gillian