

‘Thou hast commanded thy commandments to be kept most diligently.’

Ps 118:4

The 8th September is the feast of the Nativity – the birthday – of the Blessed Virgin Mary. So whilst the Mass is that of the Sunday, with green vestments and so forth, nonetheless it seems fitting to speak of Our Lady.

Many Mediaeval and renaissance paintings show Our Lady at her prayers. Some, with more piety than accuracy, depict her with a set of rosary beads which, obviously, she never said. Even when the Blessed Virgin appeared to St Bernadette in Lourdes Bernadette noticed that Our Lady fingered the beads but her lips were not moving. No, Our Lady never says the rosary. What prayers, then, did Our Lady pray as a young girl in Nazareth? Chiefly, she would have prayed the Psalms, that rich volume of sacred songs in which the soul is lifted in praise of God, calls upon Him in times of need, thanks Him for His goodness and blessings, laments loss and betrayal, rejoices and mourns. Indeed, every human emotion and need is met in one or other of the psalms.

The longest psalm is number 118. It is a meditation on the Law of God, on its goodness, its beauty, and its justice. It sings of the delight that a follower of God’s Law will find in his heart if he remains faithful to the Law, and even likens the laws of God to the sweetness of honey (v.103).

But there are also lines which jar with modern sensibilities. Near the beginning of the psalm, when the Psalmist is exclaiming how blessed is he that seeks God’s Law with his whole heart, we find the line: ‘Thou hast commanded thy commandments to be kept most diligently’ (v.4). Ronald Knox translates the line as: ‘Above all else [the Law] binds us.’ And the English Standard Version of the Bible, which we will be using in all the readings at Mass

from the beginning of Advent, gives it as, ‘You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.’ Whichever translation of the Bible we use, the Law is unquestionably imposed upon us as an obligation, as a commandment, a precept that must be followed, a duty to which we must adhere.

These are not popular words these days, are they? Obligation, commandment, duty. We are, all of us, so influenced by the world in which we live that we prefer to think exclusively in terms of choice. I choose to go to Mass; I choose to become a follower of Our Lord; I choose to keep the teachings of the Catholic Church, or – more often, I suspect – I choose *which* of the teachings of the Catholic Church to adhere to. Certainly, we *do* choose whether or not we practise our Catholic Faith, and when we take delight in doing so we can say that we are filled with piety, one of the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit which fills us with a longing for God and the things of God.

But *choosing* to do God’s will does not remove the *obligation* to do God’s will, an obligation placed upon us by our Creator at the moment of our creation. Every rational creature brought into being by Almighty God has a duty to know, love, and serve God. A duty to sing His praises and to thank Him, a duty to keep His commands and to live according to His Law. This duty is fulfilled whenever we practise the virtue of *justice*, which is the virtue by which we give to others what we owe them. *Religion* is also a virtue. *Religion* is a subset of justice and is, specifically, the virtue by which we give to God what we owe God.

When people say they are spiritual but not religious, what they probably mean is that they like the idea of some form of spirituality but refuse to accept the obligations and duties to God that then places them under.

For our part, it is good indeed – it is a beautiful gift from the Holy Spirit Himself – when we can delight in keeping His Law, but whether or not we delight in doing so, the

obligation remains, and we are commanded by God to practise the virtue of justice at all times.

This need to observe God's Law is the main theme of Psalm 118, and we know that the Blessed Virgin Mary pondered on the Law of God in her heart, and that she prayed the psalms with great devotion and humility.

But here's the thing. For Our Blessed Lady – and unlike us, most of the time – there was no distinction between the gift of *piety* on the one hand and the virtue of *justice* on the other. For her, the two were one and the same thing. Choosing to keep God's Law did not remove from her the obligation to do so; yet, at the same time, so filled with grace was she, that fulfilling her duty was always a delight.

Can it be so for us also? Can we acknowledge that we are under certain obligations to God and owe Him certain duties – for example, to go to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day that we might worship Him – *and at the same time* find delight in singing His praises? What a wonderful birthday gift to Our Lady that would be!