

When we speak of the mother of our Lord, one of the ways by which we refer to her is as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Perhaps that sounds a little too formal to our ears at times, but it is a fitting title, as it comes straight from the Bible.

Her name is Mary, she bore Jesus yet was a virgin, and as the Holy Spirit says through her as He inspires her timeless song, “All generations will call me blessed.” Ergo, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit also inspires her cousin Elizabeth to speak of Mary’s blessedness as she declares, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

If God causes this blessedness to be stated twice in a very short period, we would probably do well to consider it more closely. And as we do this, we’ll see how the words spoken by Elizabeth concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary teach us how the Lord God blesses us as well.

Perhaps the first thing we should note of Mary is why she is blessed. The Spirit says through Elizabeth: “blessed is she who believed.” This blessing from God doesn’t come because Mary has earned it or deserves it. It isn’t as though she has done enough to finally win God’s favor and become the mother of His Son.

No, Mary is blessed because she believed the Word of God. She believed, when she heard in the Psalms that all humanity, all those descended from Adam, had inherited his original sin and were born in sin – including herself – and therefore in need of a Savior. She believed, as she heard in the Law of Moses, that to be with God, one must be holy as God Himself is holy. She believed, when she heard in the prophets that God would send His Anointed One, His Messiah, to redeem His people from their sins and restore them to Himself.

And most especially, Mary believed when the great angel Gabriel declared that she would conceive and bear a Son, and that this child would be the Son of the Most High and Savior of His people. As the Virgin heard the Word of God from her parents, in the synagogue, from the archangel, the Holy Spirit created and sustained faith in her heart blessing her to believe incredible things.

The next thing we should note is that those things which the Virgin Mary believed were things that needed to be believed. They had to be taken on faith; they could not be grasped through observation or human reason.

For starters, she had to believe that what the angel had said, that she was in fact at that moment carrying the Child in her womb. Mary knew full well where babies come from, hence her honest confusion at the angel’s message: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And at the time when Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, the Christ-child in her womb is maybe a few weeks old. Jesus is in there, but He’s way too small to feel or cause any symptoms. It’s an act of faith for Mary to believe that there is a baby inside her, and that that baby is the Son of God.

Coincidentally, the Scriptures also show us here that the Christ is recognized by faith when the second person to recognize His presence is His unborn cousin John, who though only six months along leaps and kicks and wiggles with joy at the coming of His Lord.

Mary has still more to take by faith in all this. She has to trust that God will take care of her, despite the fact that no one's going to believe her story.

For example, consider her betrothed husband, Joseph. The Bible tells us that he is a just man, one who observes the Commandments and trusts the Lord. Yet when he finds out, he doesn't believe at first and resolves to divorce Mary. It takes a message from an angel to let Joseph believe the truth.

For the rest of the community, well, they can count to nine months, and when the numbers don't quite add up, rumors of adultery start, rumors that persist even into Jesus' adulthood. Imagine what that must have been like for Mary, having people whisper about you as an adulteress for decades and being totally innocent of it.

Mary also had to believe that God would give her the gifts needed to carry out the task for which she had been chosen. Maybe there was a little excitement at finding out that she was going to be the mother of God. But then the reality has to sink in and she realizes what a huge task that is. Being the parent of a regular child is challenging enough at times – can you imagine being told that you're going to raise the Son of God? You can often recognize a first-time parent by their being a little more nervous and protective, can you imagine your first child being the Messiah? No pressure!

And if He's the Messiah, that means Mary is the woman foretold in Genesis 3, whose seed would crush the serpent. So again, no pressure, but you need to live up to being the subject of God's first prophecy of deliverance! It's only by faith, only by the Spirit blessing the Virgin with strength and patience and trust, that she could handle all that.

And by the grace of God, Mary does believe and is blessed. She is blessed to rejoice in God her Savior before He is even born. She is blessed to feel the love of God as that love incarnate wiggles and kicks inside her. She is blessed to hear the Word of God, that Word who spoke creation into existence, when He just coos and squeaks and giggles.

However, the days won't always be wonderful. She'll be told that, because she is the mother of the Christ, a time is coming when it will feel as though a sword has pierced her very soul.

She will be led to doubt, thinking that her Son is out of His mind and, when she tries to call Him home, hear those words, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Mary will learn firsthand the hard, hard lesson that the family of God must come before one's earthly family.

And the Blessed Virgin Mary will have to watch as her baby boy suffers the brutality of man and the wrath of God as He hangs on the cross. She witnesses, certainly through tears, as her Son performs the task for which He was named Jesus – saving His people from their sins.

Only God-given faith sustained Mary through all that. And that faith would lead her to understand that death wasn't the end. Her faith would be grown in joy and confidence when her Son and her God rose from the dead three days later. Her faith would be magnified when, as she was gathered with the disciples on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them all, appearing as tongues of fire on their heads.

Her faith, which would let her trust in her Son as her Lord and Savior, would cause her to be brought at last into His presence when she closed her eyes for the last time, receiving the fullness of blessedness which our Lord gives to all who fall asleep in Him.

And before her death, Mary's faith would be used by God to bless countless people through the ages as she related the story of what the Lord had done for her. The evangelist St. Luke notes at the beginning of his gospel that he spoke to many eyewitnesses to put together his account. Who else could have related the Christmas story with the warmth of a mother but the Blessed Virgin Mary, who "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart"? Because she believed, we here are blessed as well.

Our blessedness as Christians certainly reflects the blessedness shown to Mary. Though her being chosen to be the mother of our Lord was a gift unique to her alone, the grace and mercy and love of God that gave her faith and blessing are the same grace and mercy and love shown to us as well.

The words of Elizabeth apply to us as well: "blessed is she who believed." As with Mary, our blessings from God don't come about because of our efforts. We could never do enough to earn God's love or favor. We are not blessed by God to be His people, His children, because we deserve it. In fact, God is quite clear in His Word that, as sinners, we deserve His wrath and punishment.

But in love, God comes to us and tells us that He has chosen us to be His own. He tells us that we are forgiven, that our sins have been paid for by His Son, our Lord Jesus. He tells us that it is by His grace that we are saved, that this is not our work, that we have nothing to boast of in ourselves. We are blessed, and it is God the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts to create faith and allow us to believe that we are blessed.

As with Mary, this faith is essential, because the blessedness of being a Christian is not often apparent to the outside world, or even to our own observation or reason. Being a Christian is no guarantee of worldly success or prosperity.

In fact, as you well know, in many parts of the world believing in Jesus as Lord and living that out results in all sorts of trouble and persecution. For Christians in China and Somalia and even Canada, it seems they are far from blessed by any worldly measure. Only God given faith lets Christians see their blessedness when facing persecution. Only faith lets them know that their Lord suffers with them.

Aside from persecution, blessedness must also be grasped by faith when God's people suffer trials in their own lives. Christians who have been afflicted with chronic medical problems or injuries that won't seem to heal, Christians who bear the cross of loneliness and isolation, Christians who struggle to provide for themselves and their families, all these and others would seem to be examples that Christians have no special blessedness from God. Only faith lets us cling to Jesus in such times and know that our God turns all things to good for His people. Only faith lets us know that God's grace is sufficient for us when we have thorns in our flesh, like St. Paul.

Belief in the blessing of God is also what keeps us from falling into the many temptations and objections the world raises against the Word of God that guides us. Mary's claim that her baby was from God seemed ridiculous to the outside world. The Bible's teaching on how the world was made,

and how God has ordered men and women to live within marriage, and how even the smallest single-celled baby – which our Lord Jesus once was – is a person, and many other issues, these seem ridiculous to the world as well. Everyone knows babies aren't conceived by virgins; everyone knows that men and women are interchangeable and gender is a social construct – so the thinking goes.

Attacked by mockery and reasonable-sounding arguments and our desire to fit in, it must be faith given by God that holds us to Him and lets us see how blessed we are.

The more we cling to Christ, the more we feed our faith through the Word and the Sacrament, the more we are able to see just how blessed we are as Christians. We may not get treasures in this life, but that's okay, because our God has granted us treasures in heaven that will never fade away.

Faithfully following the Word and living as Christians will cause divisions, as Mary and Jesus felt, but being a child of God means being joined to an eternal family, a host that no one can number, who will love each other perfectly for eternity.

Being a Christian and not compromising with the world may mean that you'll never be in a position of worldly power or prestige, but that's okay, because the day is coming when, as the Virgin sang, the mighty will be cast down from their thrones and the humble will be exalted.

Facing the trials of life, we Christians can rejoice in the Lord always, as St. Paul wrote in our Epistle reading. The unbelieving world won't be able to understand why we do this, just as it wouldn't have understood why the unborn John leapt for joy in his mother's womb. But just as John knew by faith that he was in the presence of his Savior, we too know by faith that our Savior is with us now and forever.

By faith, we are able to share the blessedness we are given with others. As the Virgin Mary recounted God's faithfulness and mercy to St. Luke and through him to all who read his gospel, we can recount God's faithfulness and mercy to those in our own lives.

We can share hope for eternity with those trapped in the worries of today. We can share the promise of peace and comfort in heaven with those suffering on earth. We can share the blessedness of God with those who feel rejected by the world, because that God was born, died, and rose for them.

In the name of Jesus, amen.