

27th Sun (A)

5th October 2014

‘Rosary of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary’

Is 5: *What could I have done for my vineyard that I have not done?*

Ps 79: *Visit this vine and protect it.*

Phil 4: *the peace of God which passeth all understanding.*

Mt 21: 33–43: *the parable of the vineyard tenants.*

One of the most characteristic items of Catholic culture is the Rosary. No doubt each of us has a rosary. More than likely, we have more than one. As a priest I seem to have acquired many rosaries, so that they end up being kept in various different jackets, cassocks, or other locations. Maybe you were given one on the occasion of some celebration or sacrament, or when you were a child; or by a friend who has been to some shrine or place of pilgrimage. Anyway, the fact of the matter is, you’re almost bound to have at least one. What’s more important is: do you use it? Do you pray the rosary?

In this month of October, month dedicated to the Holy Rosary, it would be good for us each to renew our devotion to this beautiful prayer and practice. I suppose that a number of questions arise. First, why pray to Our Lady at all? How does praying to Our Lady fit in to praying to God Himself? Secondly, what about all the repetition? — isn’t that all a bit mindless? And thirdly, well, can’t I just pray in my own way? Why do I have to use the Rosary? All these are valid questions.

First, about praying to Our Lady at all. The heart of the rosary, of course, is the *Hail Mary*, that traditional prayer, built up over many centuries, that is recited 10 times in each decade. The first half of the *Hail Mary* are words taken from the Gospel: the greeting of the Angel Gabriel, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you”; and the honour afforded her by her cousin Elizabeth, “Blessed are you amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The 2nd half of the *Hail Mary* is in fact a request for prayer: “Holy Mary, ... *pray for us*, sinners, ...” So, in fact, even a quick look at the words of this most basic prayer “to” Our Lady shows us that it isn’t really a prayer “to” Our Lady at all, but an invitation asking for her prayers for us. We do not in any sense pray to Our Lady as if she were God; but we request her prayers, as indeed we request the prayers of other saints, too. We ask them to pray for us, since we know that they are in heaven, close to God, already beyond the vagaries and compromises of this earthly life. From their place in heaven — from Our Lady’s exalted God-given place as *Queen* of Heaven — they are dedicated to assisting us in our earthly trials and weaknesses. So, the Rosary, as a devotional accumulation of *Hail Marys*, is a powerful way to invoke Our Blessed Lady’s maternal prayers for us as her children. It was God Himself

who has placed her there in our lives, alongside her divine Son; God desires that we seek His Mother's assistance and intercession.

What about all the repetition? Isn't that a bit boring? Well, any meditative prayer will usually consist of a device that carries us along. The Rosary operates on three levels: (i) there's the actual words of each individual *Our Father*, *Hail Mary*, and *Glory Be*; (ii) there's the 'mystery' of the decade, i.e. the event in the life of Jesus or Mary that we are recalling; and then (iii) there's maybe some intention which we have in mind for that decade: someone or something for which we are praying. Our focus probably goes back and forth a bit between these different levels of the prayer. Certainly we are not, in each and every *Hail Mary*, focussing on the precise words of each sentence; we don't need to, it is enough that the prayer carries us along, as a vehicle, so to speak, of a higher meditation. Additionally, it has been shown that saying the *Hail Mary* in alternate halves, out loud, with others, is exactly the right pace for the most relaxing human breathing rhythm! Many benefits, then, to this gentle repetition of such sacred words.

Thirdly, on the matter of the importance of the Rosary to us, as Catholics, we should remember that it has a huge long

tradition, dating back at least as far as St Dominic (c. 1200AD). As the Church we have been praying the Rosary for centuries, and countless of the saints have testified to its efficacy. Remember, even, that in the apparitions of Our Lady to Bernadette at Lourdes, Our Lady was herself holding the Rosary, and praying on the beads along with St Bernadette. What better recommendation could we have? And, if we think about it, the Rosary is a marvellous way to unite ourselves with the major events of Our Lord's life, and the way in which Our Lady too took her part in that. Praying the Rosary is like reading a mini-Gospel, isn't it, taking us from the moment of the Annunciation, Our Lady's assent to the wonderful mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, right through to her taking her place in heaven alongside Him, where she pleads and prays for us, with all the saints. In this simple fashion, not requiring any academic understanding or huge effort, we are placing our lives, our prayers, our concerns, our loved ones, within the greater picture of salvation. Our Lady leads us to share, like she did, in the mystery of God's powerful love. Let's take up our rosaries; let's allow Our Lady to lead us to her Son, and to heaven. As the Church always says, "to Jesus, through Mary."