Solemnity of Mary, 1 January,

Because preaching is such a labor of love for me

But a labor nonetheless

I can never remember throwing a sermon out

No matter how banal or ineffective

And, as a matter of habit,

Part of my preparation toward preaching on Sunday

Is a review of previous sermons

preached on that feast or texts

to see if there is some kernel of an idea

that is worthy of further development

or some homiletic path once taken

that should forever be abandoned

True to that pattern, this past week I went searching

Through digital files and decades of 3 ring binders

With remnants of preaching that go back to 1974

But through all of those archives

could not find a single sermon for Feast of Solemnity of Mary

Now I know that in the past 49 years of preaching

I must have preached on this feast before

But was lacking any previous starting point

Either to build upon or repudiate

The one general impression I do have of this feast

Is that it is a very very confused feast.

For the vast majority of our fellow citizens

Obviously it is New Years .. the beginning of the civil year

Or, for many, a lost day of recovering from revelry

That for many was prolonged into the wee hours

Of the morning

I doubt few of them are among us

One blogger thought we should rename this day

The solemnity of low attendance!

There actually is a ritual mass in the new Roman Missal

For the beginning of the Civil year

But the rubrics indicate that “this Mass may not be used

On January 1st”

As I said, a little confusing

Traditionally 1 January, the octave of Christmas

Is also the feast of the Circumcision

When Jesus underwent ritual that rendered him a Jew

Yet that festival remembrance has all but been erased

Apart from the echo in today’s gospel

That gospel also reminds us that this feast

Also celebrates the name of Jesus …

But that ritual aspect also seems off the table

And so while it is new years

The feast of the circumcision,

And the naming of Jesus

The church celebrates none of those

instead this is the feast of the Solemnity of Mary

the Mother of God

it is not a feast many would guess would occur today

and the logic of feast may not be abundantly clear

a number of years ago Andrew Greeley

commented on the incongruity

Of this civil festival with this Marian feast

*It is curious that the liturgists chose to make New Year’s Day, the day of hangovers and guilt and of resolutions that we know we’re not going to keep a day to honor the Mother of Jesus who hardly is an appropriate symbol for how many people may feel this day. However, the first day of a new year is a day of new beginnings and Mary represents the perennial new beginning. For one she brought her son into the world, there was the most dramatic new beginning, the most dramatic revolution in human history. The human condition was changed forever. We could breathe easier again. There were grounds for hope. Despite all the things that can go wrong in human life, we began to believe that love was stronger than hatred, good stronger than evil, life stronger than death. So we can accept that we have gone through another frustrating, disappointing, perhaps unhappy year of our life … [but because of] Mary and her son we will continue to live and continue to hope.*

Since I read that quote

At the beginning of last week

I have been trying to concretize how this feast

That focuses on Mary’s title as the “Mother of God”

Might be a source of hope and inspiration

When we consider the title of Mary as “mother of God”

What the feast and the underlying teaching stress

Is that Mary was not just the mother of Jesus

Not just the mother of the Human nature

Of the second person of the trinity

But also Mother of the Christ, the divine nature of that person

This is not like Greek mythology

Not like Hercules whose mother was a mortal

And whose father was a God

And he in turn was a demi-god

No, Jesus fully human and fully divine

Had a human mother,

Mother of person of Jesus in his humanity and divinity

Theotokos the Greeks called her – the God bearer

I know how contradictory that sounds

How a human could parent the divine …

But it is precisely in that paradox

In that juxtaposition of human and divine

In the inexplicable linking of a creator with the creator

That hope is born anew

While I was pondering this paradox,

I recalled the play Elizabeth Rex

Which I attended a number of years ago

at Chicago Shakespeare theatre.

This is an unusually powerful fictional depiction

Of Queen Elizabeth the night before she had her lover

Robert, Earl of Essex

Beheaded for treason.

There is historical evidence that the night before the beheading

She had a Shakespeare play performed for her

While we do not know which one

Canadian playwright Timothy Findley chooses

“Much to Do about Nothing”

And in a pivotal twist,

The Queen has the actors sequestered

And in need of distraction as she awaits the dawn

She spends the night with them

While Shakespeare is in the room with her all night

It is not Shakespeare who commands her attention

But Ned Lowenscroft

Shakespeare’s most famous leading lady

Whom Elizabeth had seen play Beatrice that night

And who himself is dying

The pyrotechnics between these two are riveting

The actor who is so effective at playing women

And the Queen, Elizabeth Rex, who has had

to bury her femininity .. and rule like a king

And in the course of the evening

They strike a bargain …

Ned promises to teach the queen how to be a woman

And Elizabeth accepts the task of teaching Ned

How to be a man …

The power in the paradox is palpable

As they psychologically and physically

dress and undress each other

baring their own souls and stripping away

the masks of the other

shearing away the facades and tearing down the walls

each has constructed to protect themselves

in the course of the evening

they both reveal and explore how the death of a lover

has changed them

but how it can also transform them

to live and die with more authenticity

with more self-respect

even with more love

In a striking way

This wondrous piece of art

Touches on a fundamental human paradox

*That women can teach men how to be men*

*That men can teach women how to be women*

*That children can teach parents how to be adults*

*That the poor can teach the wealthy about true richness*

*That the sick can teach the apparently healthy about wellness,*

*And that the dead can teach the living something about life*

It also reminds us that Mary is not only the queen of heaven,

but the queen of paradox

Who, along with Joseph, played a critical role

In teaching God how to be a human being

And in that unusual mixture of humility and tenacity

Fidelity to her son’s ministry

while largely marginalized by the same

a female God-bearer in a patriarchal society

maybe she has something to teach us as well

as the old year cedes to the new

as our resolutions to lose a few pounds and better health

turn to resolutions to gain a few friends

and move toward more authentic living and dying

So in the spirit of Mary the Mother of God,

But in the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson [1850]

That sound so oddly contemporary, We pray:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

   The flying cloud, the frosty light:

   The year is dying in the night;

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,

   Ring, happy bells, across the snow:

   The year is going, let him go;

Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind

   For those that here we see no more;

   Ring out the feud of rich and poor,

Ring in redress to humankind [all mankind]

Ring out a slowly dying cause,

   And ancient forms of party strife;

   Ring in the nobler modes of life,

With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,

   The faithless coldness of the times;

   Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes

But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,

   The civic slander and the spite;

   Ring in the love of truth and right,

Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;

   Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;

   Ring out the thousand wars of old,

Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,

   The larger heart, the kindlier hand;

   Ring out the darkness of the land,

Ring in the Christ that is to be.