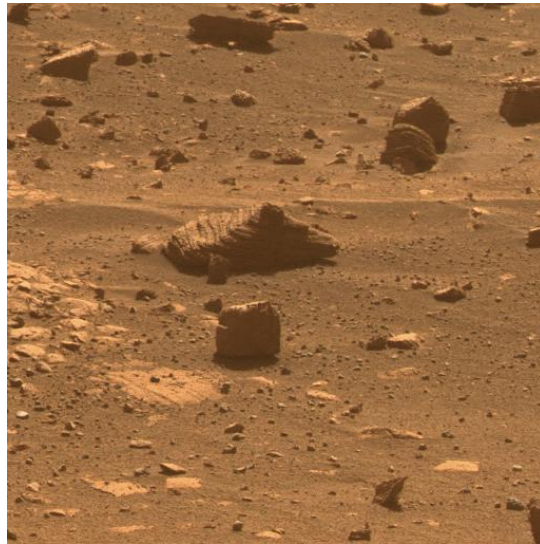


ANCIENT ROCK

Readings: Is 26: 1-6; Lk 1: 26-38

It is good to be here at the Grotto and to look towards a new year of pilgrimages. The theme that will be the focus of this year's pilgrimages will be "The Lord is my Rock".

We have seen lots of rocks so far this year in the amazing pictures from the surface of Mars. They were clear and startling images. Rock is solid and unchangeable and timeless. The Martian landscape has hardly changed for thousands of years.



That is why rock can be an image of God – utterly reliable, strong, dependable, invulnerable. You can build your house on it, and it will not fall (Mt 7:25).

But the Mars missions were looking for signs of life, or even for a sign that Mars might once have been able to sustain life. There was no sign of life in those rocky deserts. When you look at it that way, rock is not a good image of God, because it is barren and lifeless.

The only positive sign was that, among the rocks of the polar regions, there was water, or rather ice.

When the Jews were wandering in the lifeless desert, not unlike the Martian landscape, they thought they would die of thirst. They complained bitterly to Moses. Moses, following God's instruction, did a remarkable thing. He struck the solid, barren, timeless rock and drew out water.

It is a wonderful image of God – reliable, solid, dependable, unchanging, but also the infinitely abundant source from which all life flows.

That is what this Grotto eloquently symbolises – life-giving water flows from the ancient, unchanging rock. Canon Micheál Liston remarked last night that the name of this place Massabielle, probably means *masse vieille* – the ancient rock.

That is what this grotto says to us. God gives life and gives it abundantly. That life flows in its fullness when we recognise the Lord as our rock on whom we build our lives, in whom we place our trust, whose utterly reliable mercy is our hope.

It may be that our lives at any given moment are full of disappointment, anxiety, fear or sorrow. We can get swamped; we can desperately try to claw our way out by our own resources; we can feel helpless. What gives life is to open ourselves in trust that in all that may happen to us we recognise that Jesus is with us as he promised, that the Father's merciful love surrounds us, that the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, is in every experience, however painful.

It may be that, at other times, we are full of our own happiness and success, full of hope, feeling that nothing can go wrong. What gives life is to know that all that is good comes from God and that he calls us to a gift greater than we have ever imagined, a gift that human eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived (I Cor 2:9).

The life of God's grace, which is stronger than sin or suffering or death, and which is greater than anything we experience, was given to Mary in abundance from the first moment of her conception. She called herself 'the Immaculate Conception' here at this grotto, but only after she had first shown Bernadette the abundant spring flowing from the ancient rock.

We come here to recall Mary's message so beautifully summed up in that spring. She was the one who believed what was spoken to her from the Lord. She was the one who trusted absolutely in the utterly reliable rock of God's love – "let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). She became the mother of Christ who came for us that we might have life and have it abundantly.

May our pilgrimage here be a fruitful step on our journey to the fulfilment of that promise when God's people, "will hunger no more and thirst no more... for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"(Rev 7:16,17).

9 February 2004