

PRESENTATION OF THE LORD, 2014

The Feast of the Presentation is an account of Jesus' first visit to the Temple that took place forty days after his birth. Mary and Joseph, devout Jews that they were, brought their infant son from the stable nursery in Bethlehem to what was then one of the Seven Wonders of the World and there, amidst huge stone walls and spacious open-air porticos, Mary and Joseph presented the Christ child to God, with the sacrificial offering of the poor, two young pigeons.

The story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple includes three generations. And so when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to be presented in the temple, they meet two seniors: Simeon and Anna. And just as the parents of the Christ child had something to learn from these elders, so then do we.

Simeon had seen a lot of years. He was also a man on a mission. He was looking for God's Messiah and did not want to die until he had realized that mission; there were probably other holy men and women hanging around the Temple who also wished to greet the Messiah, but who died without receiving that gift.

However in Simeon's case, the Holy Spirit had promised him that he would see the Messiah before he died. Nevertheless for this to happen, Simeon had to do his part: he had to keep looking. He had to stay alert and remain true to his mission. We too need to look inward for the Holy Spirit and that takes some ongoing attention. It doesn't happen by simply uttering a quick prayer or singing a hymn any more than sending a Mother's Day card will, by itself, create and maintain a relationship with our own Mothers.

Certainly we've learned a number of things about God from our families and from religion teachers while growing up. And as effective as such teaching may have been, we sometimes conclude that we now know enough about God. And so from here on in, we may decide that the Christian life is primarily a matter of keeping a few rules that have been drilled into us and reciting prayers that we have learned somewhere in our past.

However such thinking is as delusional as the kindergarten graduate who announced to his parents that he could now quit school because he had learned enough. Just as professionals need to keep up in their fields in order to remain competent, so do we need to update our understanding of the watered down theological answers to complex questions that we were given as children, if we are going to grow in our own spiritual enrichment.

After all, what we learned in the classroom was only a start at what we need to know because learning is a lifelong process. If this is true regarding a particular subject, trade, craft, art or hobby, then how much more is it true regarding our relationships in general and our relationship with the infinite God in particular? An infinite God can never fit into a finite box—and our brains are finite boxes. In other words, we are limited in our ability to understand anything, let alone an infinite God. This is why faith, like learning, is a lifelong journey.

So if we are satisfied with the extent of our knowledge about God and his will, we have likely stopped our spiritual journey as well. If we are not satisfied with our knowledge about God and his will, then

what are we doing to increase our knowledge? Again, what we may have learned about God early in our lives is seldom enough for us to know God in a way that is most beneficial to us as adults.

This is not to imply that we all must become theologians. Rather it is more **“learning God”** than **learning about God**. And it’s more about being **committed to God** than it is about **studying about God**. Many of us have learned many things about George Washington. And we may be able to recite a list of facts concerning a sports figure, a pop singer or a movie star, but that doesn’t mean that we ever knew George or any of the celebrities that we may admire. With a historical figure or a celebrity, knowing about them is sufficient.

But in our important relationships, knowing about someone is not enough. We come to truly know a person through our experience of and with that individual. We know our spouses, our family members and our close friends from the times we spend with them, the times during which we experience them and listen to them.

Marriages sometimes fail and friendships sometimes fall apart because people become satisfied with surface facts about the other. Actually our relationship with God can fail for the same reason. Nothing less than experiencing God will enable us to move beyond knowing about God to actually coming to knowing God. Our God of yesteryear is too small, a God in the sky, an elsewhere God rather than an everywhere God who lives within. One of our brilliant Dominican priests admitted before he died that he had a theological understanding of God but no personal experience of Him in his life. He said this with deep regret and sadly was a man full of fear of God and fear of life.

Luke tells us that Simeon devoted his life to looking for God. But where do we focus our efforts? How much time do we give to a relationship, be it human or divine, says something about how important that relationship is to us. I’m going to repeat that: How much time do we give to a relationship, be it human or divine, says something about how important that relationship is to us.

After telling us about Simeon, Luke introduces us to another senior citizen: Anna the prophet. Why do we suppose Luke includes her in this story of Jesus being presented in the temple? After all, he does not tell us much more about Anna than he did about Simeon, but she too can teach us something about our faith. Whereas Simeon was about looking for God, Anna was about what to do with what we have learned of God. Anna, we are told, did two things: Like Simeon, she expressed her gratitude to God. But we also read that she did not stop with gratitude. She told others about the God she had experienced and about the child who was to be “the redemption of Jerusalem” and of the world ... and that is something that we can do as well.

Christianity can never be just about saving our own souls; it is also about doing as Anna did—namely, being a catalyst for other people to experience God and the gifts of God. Our relationship with God is not meant to be limited to a vertical “God and me” relationship; rather, it is intended to be a triangular “God and me and thee” relationship in which, with the grace of God, we work towards our salvation together. This cannot happen unless we follow the example of Anna and are willing to proclaim the message of Jesus by our words, but especially by our lives.

However in order to do this, we must have an awareness of Jesus. Recall the Breastplate of St. Patrick:” Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me; Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me; Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise;

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me; Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me; Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

This beautiful picture is experienced every time we take into our lives the consecrated bread and wine. The sacrament reminds us that Christ is taken into us, sustaining our lives, feeding our souls. This awareness of Christ among us should change how we do ordinary tasks like driving the car or going to the grocery store or picking up a child at school or visiting a physician's office.

And so what might God be saying to us today from our scriptural lessons? The word that jumps out to me is awareness, as reflected in "The Breastplate of St. Patrick." According to St. Patrick, all of life is to be lived in the presence of Jesus Christ. Imagine what our lives would be like starting right now if we deeply accepted the fact that Jesus Christ is with us, above and beneath us, before and after us, and beside and beyond us? Such an awareness would be transforming.

But more than awareness is needed for a relationship with God is to take place. There must also be action. There are times when we become aware of a need in another's life, or the suffering of some lost soul, or the pain of loneliness in a teenager or the brutal grief in a widow—and we do nothing. From God's perspective, awareness without action is the worse form of Christian indifference. This apathy is a sin that clouds our best selves and keeps us from being God's people and doing God's work.

Recall that Jesus told us that we are serving him when we take care of the marginalized and so, as we read in Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus said: "Truly I assure you, as often as you did it (a good deed) for one of my least brothers, you did it onto me...and as often as you neglect to do it (a good deed) for one of these least ones, you neglect to do it onto me." Understand that awareness leads to action and action always leads to adoration and worship of God.

These are the things Jesus talked about often, so they become the things we need to address.

Lest we forget, we meet these two seniors in the context of Jesus being presented in the temple by his parents. But in the story, Jesus is also being presented to us. It is through him that we come to know God as Simeon did, and it is through his Spirit that we are enabled to tell others of him as Anna did. So we would do well to model ourselves after both of these wise elders as we continue to look for and share the God we are coming to know.

And that is why we are here today. We gather in this place where the scriptures are read, the word of God proclaimed and the sacraments given so that we can say with one voice that God is among us. In Christ, God is beneath us and over us, behind us and before us, with us and within us. Live in Christ's presence always and we will be able to conquer our fears and find new joy in living.

The alternative is living under the clouds of doubt and fear, but then what kind of living is that? I do believe in God, but what if, as some speculate, there is no God? To be honest, I would still prefer to live out my life in relationship with others, trying to make their lives a little less burdensome. If no God, what have we lost? But because there is a God, see what a beautiful life we will have left behind...