

Richard Bollman, S.J.
FEBRUARY 2, 2020: The Presentation
Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-32

Comment on the Scripture

The Gospel account of the Purification of Mary, and the Presentation of Jesus, shows Mary and Joseph as ordinary Jewish parents, following a custom prescribed at the 40th day after a birth. It is stated in Exodus that the first born male should be offered to God, and then “bought back.” The “buy back” was an offering of an animal, or a bird if you were poor. This is a cultural shift away from the more horrific process of child sacrifice, and becomes instead a kind of ritual whereby the child is claimed by the parents from God, and presented to the world for the good of the community. So, the Presentation.

And since the mother was involved in a process involving blood, at that same interval it was time for her to be purified from childbirth, and to return to open society. The Purification.

The story from the Gospel today is mostly about Simeon and Anna. and the way the child’s arrival, holds a meaning for them, And through them a meaning for the parents, and for people of the future. How the child’s presence is soul presence. It is for us.

The Prophecies of Malachi, where we begin today’s Liturgy, declares that the arrival of God’s true teacher or messenger will be a time of purification, soul-sifting, directed especially in Malachi’s time to the unfaithful priesthood, the family of the Levites.

And then a short selection from the Letter to the Hebrews reflects on the meaning of Jesus’ entry into this world, for the Jewish people and for everyone after.

HOMILY: “Feast of the Presentation/Purification”

Not too long ago I had a week to spend in Rome,

staying at a residence next door to our main offices.
The residence is for guests, but also for aging Jesuits,
assisted living. And so it is that in their prayer chapel
on the main wall in front, the only thing you have to look at,
there is a mosaic of this scene: Mary, Joseph, and the man Simeon.
And Simeon is holding the child, a really beautiful rendering,
and the mosaic tiles that form the picture are shining full of color.
As always in these pictures, the child is a little more than 40 days old,
more like six or eight months, like children brought here for baptism.
And as the old man holds him, the child reaches up
and puts his arm and hand around the old man's neck,
looking at him as he embraces him.

So this is an icon of prayer you might say,
you can look at it, and feel it, the weight of the boy's body,
and the hand on your own neck. It might be Mary and the child,
or St. Anthony, or St. Joseph, and here, Simeon. I enjoyed looking at it.

Then I noticed the woman Anna was not there so I imagined her.
How would I put her in the total picture:
slightly behind Simeon's left shoulder but to his right as you see it,
and her eyes are looking not at the baby but at you,
as you look at the whole image,
becoming your companion in knowing that life is offering itself to us all.
This child of promise holds and touches and belongs to us.

That's what this Gospel is about:
presence, the fulfilment of life's direction, the way youth and age
embrace and bless each other. Grandparents know all about this.
Anyone who knows a child, also knows that embrace.
And even this chapel whenever the stories are told,
the embrace of the child, or the touch of the grown man Jesus,
can become felt and real to people because this is a place
that holds such expectations.

It's what I admire in Simeon as the story is told. He is a man
who is expectant that he will see the promised one. He will listen to him,
they will get close. Being expectant
day by day, opens him to the spirit of God. A man of trust.
What might it have been like to know this man, to hear him at dinner,

and you wonder what made him so alive, even youthful.

Or, to come to church with him, or her, to pick her up on Sunday.
Why does he make such effort to come, to be here: it is a gift.
After a while, you'd start to realize that you too have expectations,
and that's what matters. To notice your expectation, that's what matters when you come.
I was talking with a young man not long back,
he's barely thirty, and he's not what you'd call a core believer,
but gradually you realize he's a church goer. So I got quiet,
wondering about that, and I mentioned this word, expectant,
this older man in the story. I told him my thoughts.
And I got to wondering about his being expectant, hopeful.
And he said, after giving it some thought,
"I go expecting I will be less lonely."
You know, I can't get that out of my mind. To be less lonely.
I captures something. Maybe even for Simeon.

Because what would that be, something felt like an arm on your shoulder,
that it could matter and become an intention about the whole of life.
Or a gesture of celebration, a song, a new child in the family,
a vision of justice and change that you are not ashamed to talk about.
This kind of experience seems to be so simple,
that it almost lies outside the boundaries of what we call faith. Trust, is it? The special quality
of Simeon and Anna, is not just being older.
It's their living with an intention, being expectant,
for what will be coming, what is next, what the Spirit of God wants to do.

To arrive expectant: check it out. Get a feel for it:
the candles, the sound of music, but even then a song within you.
The light within you that you might never notice
except for the drive over here on a Sunday.
The place within where you never have to be embarrassed.
Or hide from who you really are.
I think of it finally as an unshakable capacity for love. Or to want love.
This light that is beyond Christmas, that can always show up,
the light prepared by God for all peoples, even us gentiles.

And let me end with a remark made just a few weeks ago by Pope Francis.
He gives an annual address to about a hundred envoys, diplomats, ambassadors, the men and
women who are official representatives

of their nation, and nearly all the world nations take part.
He talked for a long while, judging by the published text,
about expectations he finds on his visits to the planet,
the tensions in young African republics, and in Jerusalem,
the first papal visit to the Arab emirates,
explorations about of citizenship, or the rights to clean water.
But I want to leave you and end here
with simply his first sentence given that day in Italian, it was.
And in English: **“A new year is opening before us
like the cry of a newborn baby; it fills us with joy and hope.
It inspires our way of approaching the times that lie ahead.”**
May we be blessed by that cry, that embrace.