

Feast of the Presentation - A Cycle February 2, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The feast of the Presentation of the Lord occurs 40 days after Christmas. In years past, today was also called the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary *and* it was called Candlemas. The last time we celebrated this feast on a weekend was 11 years ago, so the themes of the feast are most probably vague in most people's minds.

Some of you sitting in the back can see we have a stained glass window depicting the themes of today's feast. I'll try to make some sense out of it all. First the theme of the Presentation of the Lord - the official title of today's feast. This custom was based on the Old Testament Book of Exodus (chapter 13) that demanded the consecration of all firstborn males to the Lord. This law is quoted in today's gospel. This law traditionally finds its origin in that the Lord spared the life of Israelite firstborn sons when he sent the tenth plague upon the Egyptians, the plague that finally forced the pharaoh to allow the Israelites to have their freedom and leave Egypt back around 1300 BC. The original idea was that the firstborn son should spend his life serving the Lord in a special way. The parents were permitted to buy back their firstborn son from the service of the Lord for five shekels – the equivalent of about what a workman would earn in 20 days. The payment of shekels is not mentioned in Luke's gospel.

The second theme is the purification of the mother after the birth of a child. This is more complicated in that the Jews had all kinds of laws as to what was considered clean or unclean. These cleanliness laws involved certain foods, certain diseases such as leprosy, contact with a dead person or sexual activity (licit or illicit), menstruation and birth. What made a person clean or unclean was not necessarily something evil, but it was something that prohibited a person from participating in public worship until they had been purified. No one knows how certain things were classified as clean or unclean, except that the Bible designated things as such. It was an issue that led to many disagreements between Jesus and the Jewish leaders especially with regard to certain foods. In the Book of Leviticus (12,1ff), it is specified that after a woman has a boy child she must wait 40 days before she can be purified, which is done by offering a lamb and a young pigeon or a dove in sacrifice. If she cannot afford a lamb, she offers two pigeons or doves. Joseph and Mary were newlyweds and probably didn't have a lot of money. By the way, if a woman gave birth to a girl child she had to wait 80 days before she could be purified. (You figure! That was their culture and their law.)

Luke combines these two events into one ceremony at the beginning of today's gospel without going into very much detail at all. He is more interested in stressing that Joseph and Mary followed strictly the Law of the Lord and then telling us about the encounter with two holy people they met at the Temple: Simeon and Anna.

Don't worry about the length of the introduction, the homily will be short. I do need to say that the reason for the first reading is the statement of the prophet Malachi (dated about 500 years before Christ): "suddenly there will come to the Temple the Lord whom

you seek.” This prophecy was fulfilled when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple.

HOMILY – I didn’t explain where Candlemas fit in here. Today was the day when candles were blessed and people had processions with their candles. This connected with the words of the holy old man Simeon that Jesus was a light of revelation to the Gentiles.

The first oracle that Simeon speaks is a prayer that we say every day with Night Prayer in the Divine Office. It is a beautiful prayer expressing peace and fulfillment once God has touched our lives. For some people it’s a long time of prayer and waiting before that happens as it was for Simeon and Anna. Because we do not always experience God when we would like does not mean that we should give up praying and waiting. Then we may never know him. Truth is, he is with us all the time; we just do not realize it – that’s why we walk by faith, not by sight. Amen.

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

February 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION – (*Isaiah 58,7-10; I Corinthians 2, 1-5; Matthew 5,13-16*)

Events connected with the Babylonian exile frequently appear in our Sunday readings because the exile was such an important part of Israel’s history and because so many of the Old Testament writings were recorded shortly before or after that event. Those Jews who were not killed during the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory were taken into exile into Babylon (to the area near modern day Baghdad) and they were kept in exile for 50 years. What happened in 50 years was that the Persians (the people in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians and allowed God’s people to return home. Most of those Jews who returned to Israel were the grandchildren of the ones who were taken into exile. When they got home to Israel, they found their cities and farms in a worse state than ever. They had to rebuild everything, their farms, their homes, their businesses, their cities, their temple. Here is where our first reading comes in. Their efforts to survive created deep division in the community. The people lived by following the law of the survival of the fittest. The poor and homeless were ignored. God is telling them that their selfish, self-centered, ‘every man for himself’ attitude was not going to help them succeed. If they wanted to grow and thrive, they had to start caring about each other. Justice, fairness, honesty and kindness would bring light into their darkness. Selfishness would bring continued suffering.

HOMILY

We are going to be hearing mostly from the gospel according to St. Matthew this year. Matthew wrote his gospel around the year 85 A.D. His Church community was mostly made up of Jews who had become believers in Christ. Much of his material for his gospel he borrowed from St. Mark’s gospel which had been written about 15 years

before Matthew's gospel. There was a secondary source that he shared with St. Luke. That source was pretty much a collection of Jesus' sayings. Scholars refer to that source as "Q" which stands for the German name for source (Quelle). That source has disappeared somehow in the course of history. Matthew had some of his own material also which Mark and Luke did not have. Matthew took all of his material, that which he took from Mark, that which he shared with Luke, and what he possessed on his own and he arranged it all in a unique form. After beginning his gospel with Jesus' birth, he divides his material into ten sections. Five sections are made up of Jesus' teaching and, in-between these five sections, are stories of how people reacted to Jesus, the miracles Jesus worked, growing opposition, etc. Today's gospel is taken from the first major section of Jesus' teaching. It is called the Sermon on the Mount. This large section of Jesus' teachings (it is three chapters long) began with the Beatitudes and now, in the passage we just heard, Jesus is preparing to teach us how we are to live if we wish to be part of God's kingdom. By telling us we are salt and light, he is telling us what a major effect we can have on others and on our world if we live as he is about to show us. It is worth noting that Jesus wasn't just talking to his 12 apostles but to a large crowd. That includes us for the Scriptures are meant to teach us as well as those for whom they were originally written.

To be light for the world is obviously a positive characteristic for we all know how important light is to us. Try to imagine a world in darkness. I wouldn't want to live in such a world. No one would. During these winter days when the days are short and it's cloudy and gloomy, there are even some people who get seriously depressed simply for lack of enough sunlight. The condition is called S.A.D. (seasonal affective disorder). Jesus also tells us we are "salt of the earth." Even though we appreciate its ice melting qualities, at Jesus time salt was much more important than that. It was used as a preservative - as important to that culture as refrigeration is to us. People's food spoiled unless it had been preserved in salt.

In calling us salt and light, Jesus is praising us for he's telling us we have talents and gifts that could be of great value and of help to others, talents and gifts for which we often do not give ourselves credit. But he is also challenging us to be the gift to others that we can be. Our first reading from Isaiah describes how we can be light and salt for the world. Sometimes we are called to do big things to help others and sometimes it's the little day-to-day acts of kindness that are significant and important. Sometimes just giving another person a smile or a kind word is all we need to do - even if it is the hardest thing for us to do at that moment.

Whatever we do to help another is going to bring blessings back to us. I'm sure we've all experienced that. I'd like to end with a quote from Patch Adams, a doctor about whom a movie was made several years ago. He is also a doctor who likes to bring humor into his healing work by playing a clown. Not humorously, however, he said this: "Hugely important is the way a person expresses thanks for being alive. The person who does so through service will possess a great comfort throughout life."

We ask the Lord to bless us today as we come before him who is the source of all light, all wisdom and all blessings. Amen.

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

February 16, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Sirach 15,15-20; I Corinthians 2,6-10; Matthew 5,17-37*) According to the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, when God created human beings he gave us instructions about what we could and could not do, and his instructions weren't all that complicated. But, according to Genesis, our first parents thought they were smarter than God and decided to make up their own rules. They found out that was a disaster. Our first reading today, from Ben Sirach, is a reflection on sin and our freedom to choose right or wrong. Some of the philosophers of Ben Sirach's time (about 180 years before Christ) were teaching that "when I sin it's God who makes me do it." The author tells us that's not so. We have a free will and are able to choose right from wrong.

HOMILY: A Sunday School teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," she asked, "is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat, one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

Jesus is discussing the Ten Commandments in this section from the Sermon on the Mount. Last week he told us: "You are the light of the world." Now he shows us that bringing light to others doesn't just happen. It happens only when his light fills our minds and hearts so that it can shine out from us.

Jesus begins this section by telling his audience (which includes us) that if we want to enter into God's kingdom, we have to be better people than the scribes and the Pharisees. That may not sound like a difficult task to most of us, especially with the negative impression the gospels give us of the scribes and Pharisees, but for Jesus' original audience, that probably seemed like an impossibility, because the scribes and Pharisees were looked upon as the holiest citizens in Israel. Jesus says clearly we need to be better than they were in obeying and serving God. Then Jesus gives some specific examples.

He talks about anger. This is not the anger that we suddenly feel surging up inside of us when someone hurts us or when we see someone doing wrong. Even Jesus felt that kind of anger at times. The anger Jesus is talking about is the kind of anger we refuse to let go of. Jesus talks about adultery. He makes it clear that not only is adultery wrong, but walking around with an "x" rated mind is also wrong. You may have heard the story about a guy who went to confession and had a hard time knowing what to say, so the priest tried to help him examine his conscience. At one point the priest asked "do you entertain impure thoughts?" The penitent answered, "no, they entertain me." Jesus

said that's a "no, no!" Jesus talked about taking oaths. He implies there should be no need for an oath if our speech is always honest. Basically, Jesus is trying to show us holiness goes beyond external behavior. Holiness must be deep inside of us – not just an external veneer that we wear on Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

We see here too, the authority with which Jesus spoke. People were often amazed when Jesus taught and they usually remarked he speaks with authority. Certainly when he healed a sick person, or cast out a demon, he was speaking with authority. But notice how he taught in today's gospel. He said, "you have heard it was said to your ancestors," in other words, "this is what the Commandment told us," and then he adds, "but *I* say to you." He showed he could speak for God, interpreting what God's Commandment really meant.

I deliberately chose the short form today, because I want to address another issue. It touches on the principal that holiness is more than not just doing evil but in also doing good things. You've heard this one before about a man who died and went up to the pearly gates. Peter looked up his record and said "you didn't do anything really bad, but did you ever do anything good for anyone." The man answered "well I gave 50 cents to a beggar once." "Peter called up God and said "what shall I do with him?" God said, "give him his 50 cents back and tell him to go to hell." Well, doing good works is part of holiness. There are lots and lots of ways people can do good things for others. What I want to mention is a very diverse and at the same time specific way of doing some good. As you know, every year around this time we have the Catholic Ministries Appeal. It used to be called the Archbishop's Annual Fund Drive, but some people thought it was going to the Archbishop, so the name has been changed. The Archbishop gets none of it. It all goes to support these key Archdiocesan ministries: Catholic Charities and Social Services, the Seminary and promoting vocations, St. Rita's School for the Deaf, retired Archdiocesan priests, chaplains for colleges, hospitals and prisons. Do you want to have a little part (or a big part) in helping with all these good works? Just make a donation to the Catholic Ministries Appeal. You will get a letter about it sometime during the last week of February. Please help even a little.

Our goal is about \$20,505 for this year. That's about \$2000 less than the year before. So I'll tell you what, if you can give what you gave last year, we have it made. If you can give a little more, it will compensate for those who may have to cut back. Anything you give over the goal will be split with the Catholic Ministries Appeal and our own St. Vincent de Paul food pantry. Thank you for your patience and for whatever you can do. Amen

Father Joe did not preach on the Seventh and Eighth Sundays in Ordinary Time.