Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord
Cycle A, 2.2.2020
BLOWING THE VEIL FROM THE FACE OF GOD

The heroes of our gospel for today’s feast of the Lord’s Presentation are a couple of “senior citizens.” Their lives were kind of boring -- guard duty at the Temple. Fasting and praying for the sins of Israel. Poor old Anna was in the temple “night and day,” as the story tells us. For us -- fifty-some minutes in church once a week is about all we can handle. No wonder, when Mary and Joseph, faithfully following the Jewish law and presenting their son to God, pushed through the temple curtain into Simeon’s sacristy, these old folks got excited.

Here was the highlight of their day or probably their week -- a baby to be blessed, only forty days old, a resident in this world for barely six weeks. Almost everyone brightens up in the presence of a baby. Even a sour puss is moved by a gurgling, giggling newborn. This child, so filled with wonder, exiled in the now -- curious and exploring, discovering its own fingers and toes -- a fleshy ball of mystery and delight.

This child is the other end of the spectrum from Simeon and the prophetess. The infant is possibility and potential, a sign of ever-expanding horizons, a flicker of new light; the temple elders are images of a fire slowly dying. Can’t you see old Anna’s trembling hands reaching out to Mary and practically pulling the baby out of the mother’s arms in order to clutch the child to herself? Can’t you almost hear Simeon’s raspy old voice as he cries out, lifting the child above the altar: “Master, now let me die in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation...?” They saw in this child what they desired for themselves and for all of Israel -- new life and fresh hope, prayers answered and dreams fulfilled. I believe we all desire to take the child to ourselves, to know for ourselves the newness and freedom that dwells in the child, to experience wonder and joy at the world around us.

Someone once said: “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.” Many of us have reclaimed our childhood, re-discovered our lost youth, especially those who may have had an abusive childhood or growing-up years that were less than loving and nurturing. It may have been because of a father who was faithful in his duties as a breadwinner, but absent when it came to expressing love and showing affection. It may have been because of a mother who was so emotionally needy herself or so overwhelmed by household duties, that she
was unable to extend herself to her children. Many adults can lay claim to a childhood where their own physical or emotional needs were ignored because of the struggles of an alcoholic parent. Through honest admission, supportive therapy, understanding friends and lots of courage, many have been able to help that inner child, who is always within us, to live in freedom and joy. It’s possible for that wounded child within to be healed.

I recall a poignant scene at the hospital bedside of an elderly father who was dying. After his family and I offered the Church’s prayers for the dying, his son confided to me: “For many years dad and I didn’t get along very well. It was always a cold war between us. Since I’ve had my own sons, things have been better for us. I think he learned to be a better grandfather than a father. And I learned a lesson in reverse. As a father, I didn’t want to repeat the ways of my own father; I learned in reverse how not to be with my own sons.” Now, at the end of his father’s life, the adult son could look upon his dad with compassion and understanding. He could appreciate his father’s own struggles and limitations. He could forgive his dad’s failures and carry out a faithful son’s duty, as he accompanied his father through sickness and death. Life had come full-circle and was filled with amazing grace. I was humbled by the encounter.

Christian living charges us with a burden and a glory -- to grow into the mystery of Christ, and it can only happen when one is willing to let go. We can only reach oneness with Christ when there is room in our lives and hearts for him to grow within us. Whether it’s turning 18, or 40, or 65 or 85; whether it’s losing your health or your hair, your money or your memory, a person you love or a possession you prize; whether it’s yesterday’s applause or today’s rapture -- whether it’s as fleeting as the surf at Half Moon Bay or as abiding as God’s grace -- you have to move on. Essential to the human pilgrimage, to the Christian journey, is a self-emptying like Christ’s own emptying on the cross: time and time again. Each day of our lives we have to let go. And to let go is to die a little. It’s painful and it can be bloody; The alternative is to hang on, clutching our yesterdays like Linus’ blanket; refusing to grow.

As we look at the picture the gospel for today’s feast presents -- the infant who is hope and promise, and the elderly couple who receive him at the temple and celebrate him -- we can ask ourselves the question: What is it I am growing into? Believer and unbeliever alike must grow into love. For the young it will be a love of discovery and exploration; for the middle-aged it will be a love filled with passion, a desire to turn this tired old world upside down, as they forge pathways into the future; for those of us who are older, it will be a quieter love, without the passion of yesterday but surely richer and deeper. It will be a love mellowed by every face we’ve ever seen, softened from the fear and anger of yesteryear, grown more understanding of difference and diversity, more tolerant of the sinner in us all.
And at each age, the Christian journey requires a love that reflects the candles we blessed at the beginning of Mass. Those little creations of white bee’s wax, which we take for granted whenever we enter the church, stand as symbols of the life of a Christian. They burn to give light to the world around them, and in the process they are consumed. They ask nothing for themselves, but offer themselves in the selfless service of others. They invite us, at each age, at every stage of life, to let our light shine.

With the grace of God in us, we don’t have to cling to the past or fear the future. We need only to let Christ have a place in our hearts and receive him with open arms as did Anna and Simeon in the temple. Then his light can shine in us and through us, and a future filled with hope will be ours. In the Eastern Church today’s Feast is called “The Encounter” or “The Meeting” – this marvelous exchange between Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna, as they see the glory of God in this newborn infant and feel that their hopes and dreams are now fulfilled. Each Eucharist can be just such an encounter for us: if we really listen to the scriptures as if they were written for us; if we share communion truly believing that we hold in our hands the very life of Jesus; if we recognize in the faces of our brothers and sisters gathered with us the living presence of God. In his poem, The Source of Joy, the poet Rumi writes:

No one knows what makes the soul wake up so happy!
Maybe a dawn breeze has blown the veil from the face of God.
A thousand new moons appear.

May our encounter with Word and Sacrament today remove the veil from the face of God and allow us to touch the source of our joy – Jesus, the Light of the World -- as we offer him all we are, all we have and all we will become.

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