

Fr. Curtis Miller      February 1-2, 2020      Homily for the Presentation of the Lord

Who will endure the day of the coming of the Lord? This question from the prophet Malachi is a good one for us to ask on today's Solemnity of the Presentation of the Lord because the coming of the Lord is what today is all about. At first, today's feast can seem out of place, a little late. After all, we concluded the Christmas season a couple weeks ago and have moved on to Ordinary Time. Why go back to a story from Jesus' infancy? Because today is forty days after Christmas, and Jewish law required that all parents (including Mary and Joseph) bring their firstborn children to formally present them to God in the temple in Jerusalem.

What's the meaning of this ritual practice? It was called the redemption of the firstborn and reminded parents that the birth of their child was a gift from God, not to be taken for granted. The child was not their possession, but actually belonged to God, Who entrusted the child to their care. It is related to the practice of pagan nations which surrounded Israel of child sacrifice. These people believed that their gods demanded the literal sacrifice of their firstborn children. We even see hints of this in the story (that I mentioned recently) of Abraham believing that God wants him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, only to be stopped at the last moment by an angel. In place of this barbaric practice, God commanded the Jews to ritually offer up their firstborns in the temple, redeeming them by offering an animal sacrifice in place of the child, thus redeeming them (which literally means buying them back from death).

The reason this ritual was performed in the temple was because it was the most sacred place in the world, the place where God dwelled among His chosen people, the Jews. God's presence is a central part of Judeo-Christian faith. After all, God could have just created us, and then left us on our own, but out of great love for us, God chooses to humble Himself to be with us. Early in the Bible, we hear about God visiting or speaking with Noah, Abraham, and others, but there was no place where he dwelled perpetually with them. This began to change with Moses. God appeared to him in the burning bush on Mount Sinai in the desert, and again appeared there after Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to present him with the ten commandments. At this time, God also commanded that they construct a beautiful golden box, the Ark of the Covenant, above which God's presence would abide. His presence was symbolized by a cloud and pillar of fire that hovered over the Ark, kept within the sacred tent (or tabernacle) during their wanderings in the desert. Many years after they finally arrived in the Promised Land, King Solomon constructed the first temple in Jerusalem, to house this sacred Ark, and serve as the place where God would dwell among His people. Over the centuries, the temple was destroyed and rebuilt, and the Ark itself was lost. During the time that the Jews were driven into exile in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel even had a vision of God's presence departing from the destroyed temple, and finally returning later.

All of this would have been in the minds of the faithful Jews who waited for the coming of the Lord's Messiah, and the fulfillment of God's promise to dwell perfectly and eternally among His people. Where better to wait for the Lord's coming than in the temple itself? And that's exactly what Simeon and Anna did, as we heard in today's Gospel reading. Their patient faithfulness, waiting for the Lord's coming was fulfilled when they had the joy of seeing the Christ Child brought into the temple for His presentation, and they recognized Him as the long-awaited Messiah.

Today is also called Candlemas because it's the day on which we bless candles which will be used throughout the year. Why today? It seems to relate to Simeon's prophecy, when he took the infant Jesus into his arms, that this child would be the "light of revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for Your people, Israel." In other words, Simeon recognized that Jesus was the light of the world, not just the people of Israel, but for all people, throughout every age.

Candles are an apt symbol for the coming of the presence of the Lord, because they recall the pillar of fire over the Ark, they symbolize prayers being offered up, they give off warmth and light. Appropriately symbolizing Jesus, they give this light by sacrificing themselves. However, flame also burns. It brings to light our sins and faults, it purges and purifies. That's why the prophet Malachi asked: Who will endure the day of the coming of the Lord? (See, I eventually made it back around to my question at the beginning). The coming of the Lord Jesus isn't just easy and pleasant. It challenges us to grow and repent, which is never without cost or some pain. That's why some people do not look forward to the Lord's coming with joy; they dread it, and fear that they will not be able to endure it.

This symbol of the fire that purifies us of sin reminds me of a scene from C. S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, about his imagined vision of judgment and the afterlife. In this scene, Lewis sees a soul that is tormented by a hideous lizard, latched onto his shoulder, and whispering into his ear (symbolizing sin and temptation). Then, an angel who appears like fire approaches and offers to kill the awful creature. Strangely, the tormented soul resists. He's bothered by his sin, but it has such a hold on him that he doesn't want to let it go. He bargains, asking if he can come back later, or if he can keep it if it just keeps quiet, but the burning angel insists that it must be killed now. Finally the spirit of the man relents and allows the angel to tear the creature away and burn it up. It hurts, but suddenly the man is healed, and restored to freedom and joy. I think anyone who has struggled with sin or addiction can relate to this parable.

It's a good symbol of the purging fire that Jesus brings into our lives with His presence. It does hurt, but it is for our healing. If we allow Jesus to do His work on us, He will burn away our sins and weaknesses, leaving us like gold refined in fire. So who will endure the day of the coming of the Lord? Only those of us who choose to let go of our sins, and who instead of dreading the Lord's coming, look forward to it, like Simeon and Anna, with joyful expectation, longing to be cleansed by the fire of God's healing presence.