

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
February 2, 2020 – The Presentation of the Lord
Luke 2:22-40

Imagine them. Two senior citizens. Waiting one year, two, three. And many more. They represented those who were hoping for better times. That God would in some way step in and help. Not having their desires fulfilled, they could only wait with patience and prayer. They did not quit. They did not walk away from what they felt was a longing, a holy longing that was placed in them by God.

Locals and strangers alike probably pitied them. And perhaps told them to use common sense. Don't waste your lives just waiting. What if nothing changes? But these two continued their vigil of waiting. Year after year. They believed that God would not desert them.

This man, Simeon by name, was spiritually alert and believed that whatever God had planned for his people would be made known to him before he died. On the occasion when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple for the customary rites required of infant males in the Jewish faith, Simeon knew in his heart that this child was part of God's wonderful plan not just for the Jews, but for all people. He asked to hold the child and as he did, spoke a prayer that many after him said, "Now, Master (God), you may let your servant go in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation." Now I can be dismissed. This prayer was later incorporated into the official night prayer of the Church.

But it was not just the experience of a man but also of an elderly widow. To emphasize her senior status, Luke tells us she was 84 years old. In those times that would have been quite an accomplishment. She too had her moment with the infant saviour.

We live in a time after all their waiting ended. But the experience of waiting is not foreign to us. We still have unfulfilled hopes and dreams. We too long for better days ahead for ourselves and our families. For everyone really. Jesus did not come to make everything wonderful and pleasant. We still know some of the sorrow that was said in today's gospel that would come to Mary. The holiest of all families was not spared difficulties. Nor is any family.

God's presence in the world (at least for now) does not take away the difficulties that come into everyone's life. But that doesn't give us an excuse to quit. Simeon didn't quit. Nor did Anna. They were patient and persistent as they lived their lives in hope. Much like we are also invited to do.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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A gospel meditation for your home
February 9, 2020 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:13-16

Turn on the light and please pass the salt. These requests, while typical in today's homes, packed extra meaning in the time of Jesus. First, something about light. Jesus lived a long time before Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. After the sun set in First Century Israel, people would light a fire or a candle to see. In the dark it could be dangerous. Customary daily activities had to stop. Think of the panic we experience when the power goes off in our homes.

So, when Jesus was called "the light of the world," people immediately knew the meaning of such a reference. So too when Jesus said that they were to be a light to the world. In a sense, the world immediately around us was be illuminated by their presence.

And what about the reference to salt? Today we are told to be careful about how much salt we take into our bodies. Science tells us we need a modest amount of salt for certain critical bodily functions to work well. But not too much. A saltshaker on the table contains enough salt for the family for weeks.

While salt does not seem that important today, this was not true during the time of Jesus. During his time salt was needed to preserve food. Fish, meat and produce were all salted so they would not spoil. Historians tell us that most major pre-historic populations were established near sources of salt. Salt was widely used in commerce as currency. Most major religions used salt in their rituals.

In brief, light and salt were necessities for life. Jesus could not have chosen better images to underscore the importance of living a genuine holy and God-inspired life. We are to dedicate ourselves to preserving life and enhancing it by our good deeds. Plain and simple, yet of central importance.

The effect of light and salt are due to the way both are *active* ingredients of making life better for others. This invitation of Jesus dispels any idea that being his disciple involves simply a passive response as his follower. Some organizations require of their members that they only pay their dues. While fuller participation in the organization's life is welcome, it's not required. Just pay your dues. Christianity is not like that. Membership in the church as a disciple (which we all are) places demands on us. To be light and salt, to enlighten others and season their lives by our love is an everyday challenge. And in that "giving" of ourselves, we will be doing what Christ did, day by day.

David M Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
February 16, 2020 – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:17-37

Today's gospel offers us important parts of what came to be called "The Sermon on the Mount." Two ideas are woven through these sayings. One, to be a true disciple of Jesus requires not just certain actions, but more important deep attitudes. It includes not just what we do, but what's in our hearts. Second, many of these qualify as what some call "the hard sayings" of Jesus. Jesus was not an "anything goes" sort of person. He challenged his listeners to do difficult things, back then and now.

Past US president, Jimmy Carter, has been respected by most of us over the years as a virtuous man, a good Christian. Well into his 90's, he still takes his hammer to sites where Habitat for Humanity is building homes for needy families. Years back he confessed in public that he had difficulty with some of the teachings of Jesus. Particularly the one where Jesus condemned those who gazed at others with lust in their hearts. He would not be the only one, I suspect. We hear about that challenge in today's gospel.

What Jesus points to in this sermon is that true virtue and morality are not simply a matter of what we do, but also what we think. In biblical language this often means what's in our hearts. What is our basic orientation to God, to others and to ourselves? In biblical times the heart was thought of as the center of personal life. Today we would use words like "basic attitude or orientation" or what are our deep thoughts. When parents are in the role of correcting wayward teens, they might ask, "What were you thinking?" This is not a question most teens would want to answer. Partly because they may not even know.

God through Jesus wants us to know (using another gospel idea) that where our heart is, there is our treasure. In other words, God wants us to know that God values our full honesty and authenticity. No faking. No hypocrisy. God sees and judges our hearts.

Religion can too easily slip into a parade of external activities. We can attend religious services, devoutly say our prayers and do what God's commandments require while at the same time be a person who ignores the needs of others, treats certain groups with disdain or is heartless when it comes to truly caring about the poor and needy. Our hearts might be hardened. Deep down, we do not care about what's happening to others. Our focus is mostly on our own wellbeing. So honestly, explore your inner world, your thoughts and judgments and see if you measure up to having a heart that is afire with love of God and neighbor. Especially love of those you live close to.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
February 23, 2020 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:38-48

Today's gospel contains what may be the most unpopular saying in the entire Bible. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is difficult to water down these words to make them more palatable and acceptable. They are bold. They cut deeply. They make many of us a little uneasy.

In the US right now we are in the early stages of the next presidential election. Already potential candidates are in attack mode. At times they are caustic and condemning of their opponents.

Commentators say these days that we live in a divided country. We are friends of those we agree with and enemies of those we don't. The descriptors, "right and left" or "conservative and liberal" or "pro-life and pro-choice" describes not only political positions, but also deeply divisive personal stances. They can divide one neighbor from another or family members from each other. Debated issues can even bring division within a church. Fully inclusive love and acceptance seems rare in our day of political and social conflict.

Still, we have the words of Jesus, "Love your enemy." Pray for them. And don't forget that God loves everyone, even your worst enemy. That idea would not be on any banners of a candidate running for public office these days. If they did run on that platform, I doubt they would win in November.

So how might we read these words of Jesus. Their surface meaning seems clear. We might ask: Is God serious about loving one's enemies? And even praying for them? That Jesus mentioned prayer connected with this "hard saying" might help us to work our way through what seems an impossible task. It's in his reminder that God is the God of all. That God allows the sun to shine and the rain to fall on everyone.

God does not have preferences that are politically determined. Or measured against anyone's personal beliefs or any other matter that might divide us. Again, God loves all. And that doesn't mean that God approves of all that anyone does. But that's another matter. Here we're focusing on what is deeper and more important. Let us think about the fact that God does not turn away from those who have hurt us, rejected us or caused us harm in any way. Or from us when we fail to love fully. We are all sinners and need God's merciful love. Starting with that belief, we might begin to move closer to our "enemies."

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