

This past Monday the Church celebrated the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord. As recounted in the Gospel of Luke, this is when Mary & Joseph took our Lord, as per the Old Testament law of God/Israel, to the Temple to be consecrated to God. This Feast presents a number of things good for pondering.

First, the Mass offered on this Feast day has come to be called “Candlemas” because there is a long-standing tradition of blessing candles at the beginning of this Mass. In fact, what the Church calls a ‘simple entrance’ (where the priest just walks in as usual) is not even an option for this Feast, not even when it falls on a Sunday. There are only 2 options for the beginning of Mass: 1) The Procession, or 2) The Solemn Entrance. The procession consists of gathering at some location other than the church where Mass will be and processing to the church with candles. The Solemn Entrance entails starting at the entrance of the church with opening prayers, blessing of candles, and then procession in with lit candles. Mass then continues as normal, starting with the Gloria, even if it’s not on a Sunday. The first thing this Solemn Entrance is drawing attention to is the ‘specialness’ of this Feast. But what is the blessing of candles and procession with lit candles symbolizing? Actually it is not unlike the procession with lit candles at the Easter Vigil. Recall Simeon’s words when our Lord was presented in the Temple: “...my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of *every* people, a light to reveal you to the *nations*...”. The procession with lit candles at the Easter Vigil represents the light of Christ for the whole world and the same is basically true for the Presentation as indicated by Simeon’s words. Our Lord’s entrance into the Temple, where the sacrifices are made, is looking forward to His sacrifice which both teaches (provides light) and opens up Heaven, the ultimate light.

There are numerous points to think about for this Feast, starting with the fact that it actually occurs. The consecration to God of every first-born male child is something God commanded the Israelites to do, as indicated in the book of Exodus (Ex 13:1-2); i.e., it was not a man-made custom, it was commanded by God.

To begin contemplating the Feast of the Presentation, try to imagine the infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing God. Think of the vastness of outer space, for example. Modern man, so proud of all of his technological advancements and supposed knowledge, has barely peeked into the nature of even our own galaxy, much less anything beyond that. Yet the vastness of outer space is like a toy in the “hand” of God, in the hand of its Creator. Jesus is this God. That He would even become man, take on a human nature, boggles the mind. But not only that, how does He enter the world? Surely He would not belittle Himself even further by taking the form of a helpless infant? Surely He would at least come in full adult form, dependent on no one. Of course He did come in the usual way, as a helpless, dependent infant. But He goes even further. If anyone was ever above the law or exempted from it, it would certainly be our Lord. Surely He does at least that, exempts Himself from the law. The Feast of the Presentation reminds us that He did not do even that. This is one of the great lessons of the Presentation to let settle deeply into our minds. Part of almost every, if not every, temptation is to set ourselves above the law of God, to decide I can judge it, or perhaps that it simply does not apply to me because – because why? Well, I’m good, I’ve done all of these other things, I’m entitled, I’ve earned this exemption, I can just go ahead and do it. To follow the Lord (as in the Presentation), this temptation has to be rejected.

The feast of the Presentation reminds us of our Lord’s first coming and how He chose to do it. Trying to grasp the enormity of this and His extreme humility will also surely help to grow in appreciation of the continuation of His Incarnation in the Holy Eucharist. The saints have marveled over and over again at what our Lord has done: who is man, Lord, that you care for him so much? We want to bring ourselves to the point of the saints where we too can marvel at His unfathomable care for a creature who is almost nothing at all.

Also notice the humility of Mary & Joseph. The Feast of the Presentation used to be called the Feast of the Purification of Mary, which is also brought out in the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel used for this Feast. The Book of Leviticus lists a number of things that made a person “ritually unclean.” This didn’t have anything to do with immorality. *Ritually* unclean means that the person could not participate in Jewish rituals until going through a purification rite or time. This could perhaps be a prefigurement of the sacrament of Confession – remember, the material types in the Old Testament are meant to help us understand the higher spiritual realities brought by our

Lord. In any event, things like leprosy or touching a dead rendered a person “ritually unclean.” In short, it seems that things associated with death rendered a person ritually unclean, since the Jewish rituals were associated with God, who is life. Child birth rendered a woman ritually unclean, presumably because of the loss of blood and perhaps some tearing during child birth. The birth of our Lord, however, was miraculous. The dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary tells us that Mary was virgin before, *during*, and after the birth of our Lord. Furthermore, the womb of Mary, as Aquinas points out, was sacred, set aside for God. But what did Mary & Joseph do? They simply did what God commanded, they did not exempt themselves from the law. Our Lord has given us ample examples of how to be – we have to choose to follow them.

Leviticus specifies that a lamb is to be offered when the first-born male child is presented at the temple. Joseph and Mary, as the Gospel of Luke says, offered either a pair of doves or pigeons. This was the offering of those who could not afford a lamb. Mary & Joseph take no material advantage of their position as mother and foster father of the infinite, all-powerful God. In fact, the Gospel on Wednesday indicates that our Lord was rejected in Nazareth precisely because of the material poverty of Mary & Joseph – they were nobodies in the eyes of the worldly. What do my eyes perceive or seek out? Worldly greatness or profound truth?

Simeon, however, recognizes Jesus. Simeon and Anna, guided by the Holy Spirit, know who Jesus is. Simeon proclaims that our Lord is destined for the rise and fall of many, and to be a sign of contradiction. The Church Fathers seem to be in pretty uniform agreement that the sign spoken of here is the Cross; this is brought out further when Simeon says to Mary: and a sword shall pierce your heart *as well*. What “the sign” contradicts, then, is that happiness and fulfillment are brought about by satisfaction of worldly desires in the here and now. This is contradicted by the sign of our Lord’s Cross, His sacrifice. How often does our Lord bring this out as the fundamental struggle of man? How often is acceptance of love as sacrifice of self brought out as the central issue and the core belief to which we have to ascribe and then live out? If it was easy, everybody would do it.

Let us turn now to precisely that – the living it out. As mentioned numerous times before, our Lord has given us numerous examples, starting with Himself but then also in His canonized saints. This past week the Church celebrated the memorial of St Blaise, bishop and martyr of the early Church. Bishop Blaise had been arrested for being Catholic and refusing to pay homage to the Roman gods. As he was being transported to his place of torture and execution, several miracles were performed through his intercession. In one case, a wolf had taken the pig of some lady. Let’s assume it was a sow because this poor lady depended on this pig for her sustenance. In any event, Blaise found the wolf and commanded it to return the hog to the lady, which he did. This might sound ridiculous but Adam and Eve were actually given this kind of command over animals prior to original sin; it was lost only after they sinned – perhaps reflecting that man makes himself somewhat like an animal when he sins. In any event, there have been a number of saints who, having been purified, have manifested this sort of command over animals; St Francis of Assisi is believed to have been another. Bishop Blaise then had another encounter on his way to be tortured and killed – a young boy choking on a chicken bone that was stuck in his throat. Through Blaise’s blessing (intercession), the boy was delivered from certain death. The lady whose pig was restored was so grateful to St Blaise that she brought him some candles to have in his dark and dingy prison cell. This is how the custom of blessing throats (the boy choking on the chicken bone) with candles (the lady with the pig who brought him candles) on the memorial of St Blaise came about.

But while these miraculous events are certainly interesting and motivating in their own right, they are not the main point here. Suppose you were being led off to suffer intense torture and then to be executed, likely being mocked the whole time – to be treated worse than any animal would be treated. Where would your thoughts be? Would they be on the problems of others – a poor woman whose pig was taken or even a child choking to death? Most people, myself included, would probably be consumed with thoughts of themselves, and maybe with anger or fear. Blaise was not. He was so thoroughly converted, he had so thoroughly accepted the sign of contradiction that, in spite of what was coming for him, he still thought only of serving the Lord and the good of others. St Blaise, pray for us, that we might be able to do the same.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*