

Year C, Feast of the Presentation

February 3, 2019

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Jewish law required that the first born of any man or beast be consecrated, or set aside, to God, and required an animal be brought to the temple to be sacrificed as an offering to God. The law also stated that a woman was considered unclean for about a month after giving birth to a male child, and so a sin offering was also brought to the temple...the woman was unclean and, therefore, in a state of sin. The offerings were given to the priest "on duty" at the temple, so to speak, who then makes atonement on behalf of the woman. In order to keep the law, Mary and Joseph, like generations of Jewish parents before them, brought their month-old child, Jesus, to the temple.

Artists' renditions of this event typically depict an aged Simeon taking the Christ child in his arms, holding the baby gingerly...cradling his tiny head with one hand. The baby Jesus probably had that sweet, soft scent that only a tiny baby can have. At some point Simeon realizes who he was holding. I picture about a dozen different ways this realization occurs, most of them heavily influenced by Charlton Heston in a flowing white beard being directed by Cecil B. DeMille. However, the Bible tells us that Simeon praised God with the now familiar and comforting words of the "Song of Simeon": "Lord you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised; for these eyes of mine have seen the savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see: A light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel."

What a beautiful passage...so much inspired by such a tiny baby. Our faith, in fact, is heavily influenced by children. In Matthew, Jesus gathered the little children around him when the disciples would have them shooed away - "Let the little children come to me," he said, "and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." I think St. Mark was much more concise and to the point, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

What could be more pure, more trusting than the unquestioning love of a child? This is the message that Jesus had for us - be childlike in our faith, be childlike in our love of God...be childlike in our love for our fellow man.

When my children were little, I would regularly visit a 95-year-old woman from our church and bring her communion at the nursing home. I would bring my children with me because I thought it was good for them to be around older people and I thought the older people could use a bit of a diversion in the way only small kids can provide.

Florence was fascinating. She was from England, she told me she had written hundreds of letters to soldiers throughout the wars of this century: World Wars I and II, Korea, Viet Nam, The Gulf War. A couple of wars with names that I had never heard of. She was a kind and truly loving person - I felt welcomed by her the first moment I met her. Florence and I chatted about prayer one day and my then 'rebellious 8 year old daughter who felt silly saying her bedtime prayers' asked Florence if she said prayers before going to bed.

Florence answered, "Oh, yes. I've said the same prayer all my life."

"Do you mind if I ask what it is?", I pried, seizing a chance to enlighten my daughter. And Florence began to recite "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep..."

I envied Florence her simplicity...her faith and love of God were childlike. I think Simeon had a childlike faith.

Now, don't confuse a childlike faith with a "childish" faith. A childlike faith is pure and strong. It's not easily shattered...it is unwavering...even in the face of adversity. A childish faith, on the other hand, wavers at new ideas. A childish faith is threatened by change and doesn't stand up to challenges of our preconceived notions about the nature of God, the meaning of love, or who Jesus is.

A childlike faith comes from exercise. A childlike faith is a faith that is lived out 365 days a year...not just on Sunday...not just when we're feeling generous. It's a faith that grows from study and prayer. A childlike faith is excited at new discoveries. It's a faith that grows from reading and contemplating scripture and the writings of our earliest Christian ancestors.

The feast day of the Presentation of Our Lord brings home to me the importance of having a childlike faith. The savior of the world came to us as one of the most helpless creatures on earth: a newborn baby. A symbol, to me, of the level of faith we need to attain. This feast day brings home to me how my grown-up passions, impulses, even goals can get in the way of childlike faith and love of God. This feast day is a reminder to me that we should continually examine our faith in the love and saving grace of Christ and always be ready to share that love and knowledge with others.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam