

January 30, 2010

Solemnity of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Candlemas

Malachi 3:1-4

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

✕ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The songs from the first two chapters of Luke constitute the heart of Christian hymnody, almost a collection of our greatest hits. They include: the Gloria – “Glory be to God on high,” the Magnificat – “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” the Ave Maria – “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” the Benedictus – “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.”

We just heard in today’s gospel the Nunc dimittis – “Lord, release me, your servant, in peace,” and it may be the most beautiful of them all. It is probably the most emotionally complex, a personal prayer of peaceful and joyful resignation to a painful separation. It sounds notes of light and splendor breaking out, of divine rescue for each of us, of universalism, of expansive and exuberant inclusivity that all people may enjoy God’s love and care, but there are also tones of death and darkness and loss.

Today we celebrate two events described in the first few verses of the gospel. The Jewish Law required that the first son be dedicated to God, and the family would “buy back” or “redeem” for a few shekels. Today’s feast, the Presentation of Christ, celebrates that Jewish ritual. The Jewish Law also required the ritual purification of the mother forty days after the birth of a son, and this rite included the sacrifice of a lamb or, if the parents were poor like Joseph and Mary, then a couple of pigeons. The verse just before today’s gospel describes Jesus’ circumcision, thankfully not in detail. So in four verses, Luke mentions three ancient traditions – circumcision, presentation, purification – rituals from which Jesus’ followers would be separated.

Devout Simeon has been waiting for Israel’s consolation, the coming of the Son of God, and he sings his song as he sees God fulfilling his promise in Jesus. Simeon’s words harken back to Jacob in Genesis when the aged Jacob was joyfully reunited with his long lost son Joseph. Jacob told Joseph, “Now I’m willing to die for I have seen your face.” (Gen 46:30) It’s deep, visceral emotions of healing and pain, of hello and goodbye, of fulfillment and loss, of reunion and separation, the holding together of opposites.

For over fifteen hundred years, Christians have said the Nunc dimittis at night before going to sleep, and we've used it at times of death. It has been going through my heart and mind a lot the last week. We've been praying for Fr. Conner, who has been gravely ill. Early this morning he died.

Fr. Conner has assisted in this parish for at least 18, maybe 20, years. He is dear to many of us, someone from whom we learned, and found inspiration and support, someone who served us and cared for us. I don't know if I've ever met anyone who found such fun and enjoyment in liturgy, who did it with such exuberance but also with great seriousness and devotion. His enthusiasm, his delight in theology and talking about it, his intensity were exceptional. I will miss him. While we'll be reunited in heaven, our separation now hurts.

And it may be that his death will represent other kinds of losses to us. His priesthood was unusual, perhaps almost an extinct variety now. I don't know if I've met a priest who stayed in role so completely. I never experienced him as anything than as priest. He was not a father, brother, spouse or partner. I never saw him as a son to his mother. Some years ago as she was dying, he visited and ministered to her sacramentally every day, right through celebrating at her funeral. As far as I could tell, he lived wholly as a priest, wholly for the church. It's a kind of priesthood that through much of the 20th century this parish has relied upon heavily. It seems to me increasingly rare, slipping away. It's a type of priesthood that we might mourn.

When we experience loss and separation, the first thing is to acknowledge our grief, to be open and honest about it, the emptiness, the feeling that God isn't there. Jesus knew that feeling. He wept when Lazarus died. He cried on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He knew what it was like to feel abandoned. When there's separation, we, too, often feel abandoned, left out, alone.

You may have heard about the "grief cycle," Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' model to describe how we go through stages of grief as we approach death. First, there's denial - "this isn't happening to me." Then there's anger and rage - "this isn't fair." This may be followed by bargaining - "I'll do anything for a few more years." Then there's depression - "Why bother? Nothing matters." Finally, there's acceptance - "It's all going to be okay." We don't always get to that stage, to a place where we accept reality.

It's a helpful model, but only a model, not an unwavering certainty. But in the horror of facing death, having a rough blueprint can help to bring some

order and make some sense of the chaos and confusion we feel. Most of us probably wouldn't experience each stage as discrete; they usually overlap. The stages aren't linear or equal in intensity.

It's a way to understand grief at death, both the grief of the person who is dying and also those who are mourning, but really it's much broader application. It's a way to understand how we experience change, how we deal with the challenges of life - losing a job, moving to another city, changing a custom or tradition, breaking up. Every change in life involves a type of death.

Think of what happens when a romance breaks up. First there's denial - "We're really going to be able to make this work. I can make it happen." Sometimes you can, but not always. There's often bitterness - "That creep used me." There's bargaining - "Let's be friends." When I've been chucked, I got that line. It ticked me off no end: anger not only about breaking up, but now also anger that she's more over me than I'm over her. Then there's depression and emptiness - "My heart has been ripped out." "I'll never love again." "I'm going to join the French Foreign Legion." Hopefully, we get to acceptance. We move on and see how many fish are in the sea, and how catchable they are!

Whenever we're separated from someone or something we love, we experience these feelings, and it's helpful and healing to talk about them, both telling stories and expressing how we feel as well as listening to other people. It helps us come to terms with reality and to make a better future.

Of course, it's hard to talk about grief. Our culture encourages us to ignore painful feelings, to stifle them, to keep them to ourselves. Our culture even seems to consider sorrow as bad, morally depraved, something to hide. But grief is not good or bad. Now we don't want to be morose and gloomy all the time, but a Christian community needs to allow space for pain and sorrow.

Every change in life comes with loss and separation. We don't have real inner growth without loss and letting go. When you learned to walk, there was sadness you weren't going to be carried and held close by your parents all the time. When you went to school, you began to leave the warmth and safety of your parents' world. When you hit puberty, you separated from childhood. When you left home, there was loneliness and uncertainty.

Each step involved personal loss, but also growth and freedom and renewal and excitement and creativity. Not just in our early years, but throughout life, if we have the strength to endure loss and separation, we can experience real growth. Loss, separation, sorrow can still be movement toward God.

Paul tells the Romans, “The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs.” (Message Bible, Romans 8:22–23)

When we’re in pain and sorrow, perhaps we can also perceive within ourselves the new life of Christ, that even in our darkest hour, the risen, indwelling presence of Christ abides in us. As Simeon separated, departed, felt sorrow, he also trusted God was with him. Ultimately Simeon knew the good news Paul tells us: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.” (Rms 8:38–39) The good news: in Jesus Christ we might have a flicker of joy and peace even in separation and sorrow. In Jesus Christ, the opposites are held together. In the end, all will be well.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.