

SERMON AT MASS PRESENTATION OF THE LORD 2017
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JAN 29 2017

The fortieth day after the epiphany is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honour, for on that day there is a procession, in which all take part, in the Anastasis, and all things are done in their order with the greatest joy, just as at Easter. All the priests, and after them the bishop, preach, always taking for their subject that part of the gospel where Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple on the fortieth day, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw him - treating of the words which they spoke when they saw the Lord, and of that offering which his parents made. And when everything that is customary has been done in order, the sacrament is celebrated and the dismissal takes place.

That is part of the testimony of the Spanish nun Egeria, which she wrote down in her fourth century travel diary.

Her descriptions of what the Church got up to in Holy Week have figured prominently in the renewal of the Church's worship ever since the diary was rediscovered in 1884.

But Candlemas too!

What we are doing today descends directly to us from fourth century Jerusalem.

It lifts the heart.

This is the end of the Christmas season, and today we celebrate the last of the string of events related by Luke.

Jesus is taken to the Temple in Jerusalem by Mary and Joseph in response to the direction that every-first-born male child should be presented to the Lord.

There they meet two people.

Simeon, who had been assured that before his death he would see the Christ of God.

Anna, an aged prophetess, patiently waited on the Lord in the Temple and praised God when she met the Christ.

It was Simeon's song to Christ who is 'a light to lighten the gentiles' that provided the context for the procession which began today's liturgy.

But today's feast doesn't just give churches an opportunity to clear away the crib and other remaining signs of Christmas, if they haven't already done that.

Here we too acclaim Christ as our light, and this celebration with light points inevitably to the coming great festival of Easter which is the centre of the whole Church year.

There is one mystery of Christ, and it would be enough simply to celebrate Easter and keep the thing going all through the year.

But the mystery is so tremendous that we have to break it down so that we can begin to take it in, looking at it from different angles.

So here we have God coming among us, sharing our life.

And then our hearts are lifted further by the death and resurrection of him whose birth we have just celebrated.

The encounter with God here among us which is the heart of Christmas, has its prolongation and fulfilment in the encounter with the risen Christ which we share during the Easter liturgy.

Faith can be weak and memories short in the Church's life, and we can soon become convinced that we are really alone.

But no.

The love of God is dynamic, not passive, and we are constantly drawn along the road of pilgrimage with Christ, who is our constant companion.

This doesn't mean that the way of discipleship, of following Christ, is going to be easy.

Christ is a sign that will be rejected, and a sword will pierce the soul of Mary.

Sadness and pain are not at an end for the followers of Christ.

But for Mary, for Simeon and Anna that was hardly the point.

God himself had come among them.

Had come among them to share their life, to fulfil, to satisfy their longing.

Their wonder at the incarnation outweighed all the possibilities of pain, failure and defeat, because at the end of it all, and with them even now, was the God of unfailing, undying love.

God had put himself into their hands to show his love.

And for Simeon and Anna the years of waiting were over.

He had come.

The same context of waiting and watching for the Lord could characterise our life in the Church.

But of course we are part of the rest of the story.

But it can't surely be too much to expect that element to be present.

For every time we hear the Gospel proclaimed, it is as if for the first time.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist it is a renewed encounter with the mystery of God's love.

Every act of Holy Communion a staggering realisation that the Lord does indeed put himself in our hands.

Every solemn celebration of the liturgy is a renewed challenge to us, but it also lifts our hearts to recognise that the grace of God isn't something to be fondly remembered from a past age, but a reality now.

Even now, as we move forward, the God of Jesus, who so generously gave his Son to us in time is renewing his offering.

If only our hearts would leap as did those of Simeon and Anna!

They would leap if we fully realised who it is who calls us forward on this journey.

May today's liturgy enable us to take heart and share the joy of Simeon and Anna, and may the light of the procession spread out from here into a waiting world.