

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

February 2, 2020 11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

I would venture to say that there are probably a lot of things on our minds as we come together for our weekly celebration this morning. First of all is today's date---02-02-20-20 is a very unique and unusual date known as a palindrome, as the numbers are identical, frontwards and backwards. We've also just begun this 2nd month of the year, which means that the relatively-mild month of January, weather-wise, is now behind us. And that brings us to a 3rd thing that is probably on many of our minds: that today is "Groundhog Day", which is when the whole world breathlessly waits for a very famous groundhog from my former part of the United States in Punxsutawney, Pa.,--- known around the world by the familiar name of "Punxsutawney Phil"---to offer his prediction about how much longer our Winter weather will last. As we all know by now, Phil saw his shadow which means that he predicts an early Spring! Hooray! And of course, perhaps more than anything else on our minds, today is "Super Bowl 54 Sunday". Over the years, for many of us, this great football event has become more of a mid-winter "holiday" than it is a vital interest in the Football Game. There is probably as much interest in getting together with family and friends to have an enjoyable time, to watch the "Half-time Show", and of course to wait for the clever commercials, as there is interest in watching the actual Game between the "49ers" (San Francisco) and the "*Chiefs*" (Kansas City).

So this is no Ordinary Sunday---there's a lot going on to keep us busy and to distract us from the winter doldrums. But for us here at Church, there's another, very special reason that makes this no Ordinary Sunday. This year, we celebrate the beautiful Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, which takes precedence over what would have been the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. This Feast is the very last bit of Christmas that we get to celebrate. The Gospel tells us that His parents "presented Him" to the Lord in the Temple 40 days after Jesus' Birth. That's how this Feast's date is determined: February 2nd is 40 days after Christmas.

I think this Feast is a special Feast for many of us. One reason why I have come to have a special affection for this Feast Day is because 15 years ago today, I was ordained a Bishop at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh---and so this Feast really is close to my heart. But, the reason why I think so many of us love this Feast is because it gives us another opportunity to focus our attention on the Infant Jesus. Most of us have taken down our Christmas decorations long ago, and otherwise put Christmas out of our minds; but the Church only officially concludes the Christmas Season today with this Feast.

Besides the Feast of the Presentation, this day is also known as “Candlemas Day”. As we experienced at the beginning of our Mass this morning, it’s been a long-standing tradition in the Church that the Candles that will be used in our liturgical life throughout this year are blessed on this day. Part of the reason for that is because of the theme of “light” that we heard in the Scripture Readings, and in particular in today’s Gospel with the Prophecy of Simeon when he said: *This Child is destined to be “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel.”* Jesus was born to BE the Light of the World---to dispel the darkness of sin as well as the darkness that results from being alienated, or cut off, from God. That is why we blessed the Candles this morning; they help us to think of Jesus, “the Light of the World”. And when we can see reality in the Light of Jesus Christ, we are truly “enlightened”, and we are able to see the Presence of God in the reality of the world in which we live.

But I think a particularly important reason why this Feast is so special to many of us is because it deals with the joys and sorrows of Family Life. Obviously, we all know how great it is to rejoice at the birth of a new baby into our families, and what a special day the Baby’s Baptism is. That’s pretty much what St. Luke was describing for us in today’s Gospel for the Holy Family---Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Luke tells us that *“Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord”*. Now, we need to remember that they were living in Nazareth, and Jerusalem was 92 miles away. So, that’s quite different from taking your baby to your local parish church; that would involve more than a week’s journey; more than likely on foot---not an easy thing to do. Besides providing for the Infant Jesus on this journey, they had to provide food and other needs for themselves, including the prescribed offering for the Temple, which for them, since they were poor, was two turtledoves.

When they finally got to the Temple, there were likely other families there to present their children to the Lord as well. Since to the rest of the world Mary and Joseph and this Infant looked as normal as anyone else, no one saw them for who they really were. But, there were two very holy people who did: Simeon the old priest, and Anna the aged prophetess. St. Luke tells us that Simeon was *“righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”* Luke goes on to tell us that the Holy Spirit had *“revealed to him”* that before he died, he would SEE the long-awaited Messiah---the Anointed One---*“the Christ of the Lord.”* Just imagine Simeon’s Joy! After years and years of performing “dedication” rites for literally thousands and thousands of babies presented to God in the Temple by their parents, as soon as he saw this Child with these parents, he knew. The Holy Spirit “enlightened” his mind and heart, and whispered in his ear: Simeon, today is the day; this is the One for whom you,

and all the world, have been waiting! And St. Luke tells us in great detail: “(Simeon) took (the Child) into his arms and blessed God, saying: ‘Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace...for my eyes have seen Your salvation...a Light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel.’”

That is such a beautiful prayer. In fact, every bishop, priest, deacon, Religious, and lay person who prays the Divine Office prays these beautiful words in a prayer known as the “*Nunc Dimittis*”, as part of the official Night Prayer of the Church every night.

St. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph “*were amazed*” at what this old priest was praying. But then, Simeon looked directly at them and said to Mary: “*This Child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that is contradicted---and you yourself a sword will pierce---so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*”

And if that wasn’t amazing enough, the 84-year old prophetess Anna came along at that very moment, and she too was “enlightened” to recognize Who Jesus really was. As St. Luke tells us, after seeing the Child and blessing Mary and Joseph, “*she gave thanks to God and spoke about the Child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.*” In other words, she was one of the first to share the *Joy of the Gospel* with anyone and everyone that she could!

The Feast of the Presentation completes the Good News of Christmas which celebrates the foundation of our Faith, namely: that our God loves us so much that He has sent His only-begotten Son to live among us and to save us from sin and death; THAT is our Joy and our Hope!. Simeon and Anna were “enlightened” to recognize Who that Child really was: the Messiah---the Christ---the Light of the World.

Yes, there’s a lot on our minds these days: Super Bowl parties and how much longer winter will last are only two of those concerns. There are many more, and most are far more consequential. We worry about the corona virus; we worry about a growing sense of division in our country; we worry about the state of world peace. On more personal levels, we worry about our families. Parents of newborn Infants and youngsters wonder who their child will be, and what they’ll be able to accomplish; parents of older children worry about their children’s decisions, their friends, their choices; parents of grown children worry about their safety, their health, their grandchildren.

I'm pretty sure that those same kinds of concerns were on the minds and in the hearts of Mary and Joseph on this day 2000 years ago when they dedicated and presented their Infant Son to God in the Temple. And after doing so, they would have several days on their long, arduous journey back to Nazareth to ponder what those words of Simeon meant: how would this Child be the "rise and the fall of many"? And Mary would certainly wonder what it would mean that her heart would be pierced with a sword"? Something tells me, though, that every mother here knows first-hand what that means.

In the midst of those concerns, our Faith gathers us together here on this extra-ordinary day to celebrate this great Feast. As we do, I think there's one important question we really need to ask ourselves: are we, like Simeon and Anna, among those who are "enlightened"? Even amidst the busy-ness of our daily lives, are we able to SEE that Jesus is right here with us in our world, thru the Church and in the Sacraments? OR, are we blinded, or at least distracted, by the multiple concerns and the host of worries that can consume us, if we allow them to do so.

We all know first-hand that our Church in recent years has been struggling with many scandals and crises of faith, and as a Bishop for 15 of those years, I am painfully aware of the joys and the great challenges that we are facing. But I also know, and become more and more convinced every year, that Jesus is the Light of the World----Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The more we follow Jesus as His joyful disciples, the more we stay close to Him in the Church and thru the strength of the Sacraments, and especially, the more we come to "see" Him in His Word and in the Holy Eucharist, the better able we will be to live our lives with joy in the midst of these troubling times.

That's the primary reason why I called for this "Year of the Eucharist", so that all of us---beginning with myself, our priests and deacons, and all our lay faithful---can renew our understanding of and devotion to Jesus Present with us here in Word and Sacrament, and here within us, the Body of Christ. We are His witnesses; by the way we live our lives, we provide the evidence that Jesus IS here, in our world, in our relationships, and in the ways that we treat one another with Christ-like Love. For that to actually be the case, we need to be "enlightened", and I hope we know, that can't happen on our own. Just as Simeon and Anna were only able to recognize "*the Christ of the Lord*" due to the Holy Spirit's enlightenment, it's the same also for us. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us, to empower us, to console us and to enlighten us; we need the Holy Spirit to en-courage us---fill us with courage, ardor, conviction to give us the

motivation to be joyful disciples of Jesus to share the Good News of Christmas, the Good News of Easter---every part of the Good News of Jesus to all we meet.

Let us pray today, on this beautiful Feast of the Presentation that we will open our hearts and minds to allow the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do: to enlighten our minds and hearts, and to help us always to follow Jesus, Who is the Light of the World.

God bless you, now and always!