

THE FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME - C

The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

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Sunday

HOW LITTLE THINGS BLOCK GOD'S GIFTS TO US

A reflection based on texts by Mark Boyer & Carroll Stuhlmueller

Jesus was rejected by a majority of his townsfolk and neighbors. He was “too much” for them! After all, wasn't he the son of a local artisan and a woman everyone knew? How could he claim such wisdom and be the instrument of all the healings they'd been hearing about?

Isn't Jesus just like us? Yes, he is like us in all things but sin, Scripture has told us. But that isn't a reason for thinking his claims impossible and denying his words are from God. Don't we believe that God can do wonderful things through any one of us? It is God's power and grace we must trust in and we must not quibble about whom God chooses as the channel of his gifts.

The people of Nazareth were a bit jealous and they were also a bit stubborn in clinging to their ways of seeing things. We all know people who are stubborn and jealous, and we ordinarily don't worry about it. But now we see how these little things can turn into large, even immovable, obstacles to God's love. Scripture tells us such stories as that about Jesus' rejection in Nazareth to let us know that many seemingly little fault can have very serious consequences. We are not to take any human weakness lightly if it can get in the way of our growth in Christ and in the Spirit. Little stubbornness jealousies, a seemingly minor pride in our ways of understanding life are not acceptable to God.

The Scriptures tell us that many people are hurt by day-to-day stubbornness or jealousy or pride. Hurt is one of the great obstacles to people's ability to open themselves to God's graces and gifts. A hurtful word, spoken without serious thought, can drive a person away from family and from a parish or a community of faith and keep that person away for a lifetime.

Who is Jesus? Ask this question about the people through whom Jesus comes to you. We think: Who is he to say the things he did? Who is she? He or she is Jesus, “another Christ”, sent to us by God to help us leave behind the little things that prevent people from recognizing in us God's messenger. Somehow the people of Nazareth could not recognize Jesus as God's messenger, let alone as their savior. In the end they drove him out of town and wanted to push him down the steep slope that takes one from Nazareth to the town of Cana in the next valley. He had to go elsewhere because they could not have faith in God's ability to use one of their own as God was using Jesus.

We know quite a bit about Jesus from the Gospels. We know even more from the holy people we have met or heard about, people who have radiated God's love and concern and drawn others to open themselves to grace and a new life. We are to use all this to help us become the sort of person in whom others can recognize God's presence and message. We begin today, as we do every day, until we find ourselves transformed into lights of grace for others. God can do this even in “me”. Believe and turn to God.

Monday

LEADING OTHERS TO CHRIST IN FREEDOM

A reflection by Henri Gheon

People think that a work founded on authority has a better chance for survival since authority can be passed on. They think a work founded on liberty is likely to descend into chaos. Yet Don Bosco's work was founded on liberty.

John Bosco appreciated the minds of children and refused to try to constrain them. There must be a minimum of discipline but individual liberty is observed and not really controlled. He approached each boy with an interest in all that was his—family, jobs, tastes—in so far as possible just as one of the boy's peers would do this. In this way he won confidence and liking and used them, seemingly without effort, to teach the knowledge of good and evil, a desire for the best, and a taste for prayer.

Above all, prayer must not be reserved for certain times and places because God is always present. For evening prayer, he brought the boys out of church for this precise reason. What he said was short, familiar, illustrated and within the grasp of all. The boys gathered in a yard for evening prayer and it lasted two or three minutes. It was designed as part of their play. Since the master had taken such an interest in whatever games the boys chose to play it was natural for them to take an interest in his sermonettes. He would make some incident in their day the occasion of a reflection and was listened to with pleasure.

His idea was to place a child's life on what he called the "level of joy" and make this a path to the love of God. They never went to sacraments en mass because Don Bosco saw his job as winning individuals to want them.

If a boy behaved badly then he was punished but only when it was really necessary and without humiliation or violence. He wanted the worst punishment to be his own displeasure and sorrow at the bad thing done. Of course, this could only be effective when there was genuine affection binding the boys to him. And he was careful to keep this from being a "sentimental" thing. If a boy was incorrigible and had to be expelled then it had to be done without uproar and for a reason that wouldn't damage the boy's reputation with peers. All of this was part of his Method of Liberty. The goal was to win the trust and liking of a majority.

He looked for ways and make this happen. That was what he thought of as the method of love, and it is a method that works among adults just as it does among children. Love is not an approach that requires the special genius of Don Bosco in dealing with others but "works" for all. Don Bosco's goal was that the children he worked with should learn to use it with one another and in their dealings with adults. That it worked with adults is witnessed by his marvelous success in winning support, not only financially but as personal involvement. He created an institution dedicated to caring for street children and sought to turn everyone's attention from self and personal affairs to caring for and helping others. When one lives the love of Christ wonderful things happen. We are invited to do just this, day by day.

Tuesday

PREPARING OURSELVES TO EMBRACE CHRIST

A reflection by St. Pope John Paul II

Tomorrow the Church will celebrate the coming of God as a tiny child of poor parents to God's temple and the center of Israel's and our faith. The message which the Spirit of God arranged in providence for us was given when an old man, Simeon, took the child in his arms and blessed both God and the child's parents, and all of us with them. Note that the message God has prepared for us is implicit in the event itself.

The event is an encounter between the Messiah and God's temple. But it is an encounter that is accomplished personally and very humanly. An old man who has longed even more than all of us have for the coming of the Savior sees his hope fulfilled, at least in germ. On seeing this child this man began to utter words that were not of merely human provenance. They were words of prophecy. They were given to him through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his knowledge of Scripture. They are words of the God in whose honor the temple had been built and who was its Lord.

Simeon's words are enshrined in what is called the Song of Simeon and themselves are now part of Scripture. They are given us as spiritual nourishment. They bear witness to the light. They ante-date by some thirty years the witness given by John the Baptist. What is more, they end in a witness to the cross, on which the contradiction that we face when we stand in the presence of Christ is given tangible expression. That is what we will experience tomorrow.

How are we to prepare? Perhaps we can do no more than the mother whose soul, it was prophesied, would be pierced by a sword. Why was she pierced? It was "*so the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare*", to use Simeon's own words. We prepare with her for the mystery of the Passover of our Lord as it will happen in our lives. We are invited to recognize, and to embrace, with the child, our own passion and death.

The meaning of Jesus' own life is found fully only on the cross as a necessary prelude to his resurrection. So today we prepare for our own cross and renew our hope for our resurrection. We recognize that this cannot happen in a merely personal way but only as part of our belonging to a community of faith and to the entire communion of saints, of whatever time and place. This is something we need to remember and live out every day. The celebration of the Presentation of Our Lord in his Temple will be a wonderful opportunity for us to enter, in knowing faith, into God's loving plan for our lives, and even whatever crosses they may involve. And we can begin to learn to do this so that the hearts of many others will be joined with ours in that offering, even as they are joined with the offering of Jesus.

Wednesday

THE PEACE GOD GIVES US IN CHRIST

A reflection by Timothy of Jerusalem

“The just live forever and their reward is in the Lord; their hope in the Most High.” In every saint, we are shown some part of God’s love and grace as a gift to share. Today we see two such holy ones, Simeon and the Virgin Mary. Let’s begin with Simeon.

He had already received from God the knowledge that he would not die and depart this present life until he had seen the Christ. But he received much more. He took Jesus into his arms; he enfolded life eternal in love and joy. Simeon the righteous longed to see the Lord and by God’s special grace did see him, and recognized him for who he was, and opened his arms wide to receive Him.

Then he called out to God for release from the life he had lived so long that he might be with God in the fullness that only the Christ can bring. We have all heard the words: *“Now Lord, let your servant go in peace, as you promised; for I have seen your salvation.”* I have seen, so let me depart in the peace of knowing you have fulfilled your promise to Israel and to all our race. I have seen your glory, seen the angels dancing, the archangels praising you, and all creation leaping for joy. I have seen the way from earth to heaven and into your one Kingdom. Now let me depart and be in that Kingdom.

Simeon didn’t have to witness the insolence of those who rejected the Messiah, or the crown of thorns they gave him in place of the crown of love he deserved. He did not have to see slaves beating their Lord, a spear being thrust into his side, or the sun itself darkened and the moon failing and the elements of the world altered. Mary did have to see all these things, as have to see them too.

We also can pray with Simeon, *“Lord now let your servant go in peace”*. Simeon saw the salvation prepared for all peoples, our salvation and that of Mary, the Virgin Mother. But we can join her too in empathic suffering with Christ, her Son and our brother, and in doing this we learn how to share feelings with others and so to reach out to them to share with them the comfort Christ alone gives.

This doesn’t take away our suffering but gives it a new and transforming meaning. Mary leads us along this way. That is one of her many gifts to us. What is true love if it doesn’t constantly reach out to others in whatever their needs may be? But in Christ, we find peace even in suffering and find the grace to place ourselves and our lives in our God’s hands.

We know God reaches out to embrace and hold us even as Simeon was allowed to do for God incarnate. But don’t we embrace God incarnate when we receive another as Christ? Let us rejoice in knowing what a mighty work God can do through us by drawing us to see Christ in those we meet.

Thursday

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEND ONESELF FOR CHRIST

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhmueller

We have just celebrated one of the special feasts of the liturgical year which invites us to spend ourselves heroically for God. We are reminded how very powerful the light of the sun is and how purifying fire can be. All this is summed up in the symbol that is a candle—so easily snuffed out, as we are, and as the message of the Gospel seems to be. Yet God's Providence has seen to it that this seeming fragile light has overpowered even the mightiest of earthly forces. The Gospel is everywhere and its spread has been unstoppable in spite of the seeming fragility of those who bear and proclaim it. The lives of so many have been snuffed out but not the "light of the Gospel".

These reminders are intended as challenges. Are you and I willing and ready to bear the Gospel to whomever God sends our way, and at whatever cost that may require? We remember great saints who have done this, and now our God pays us the compliment of telling us we can do as much as they. In their own day, Abraham or Sarah or Rebekah didn't seem to be heroes of faith, at least to themselves. We probably have the same modest idea about our own responses to God's call.

Do you recall Paul's words to the Galatians? "*If you belong to Christ, you are descendants of Abraham and Sarah*". The Letter to the Hebrews makes explicit the fact that Jesus "*did not come to help angels but the children of Abraham and Sarah*". Jesus came not just to shed the light upon the world but to support us in doing it. The prophet Isaiah might have spoken directly to us: "*I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing and uselessly spent my strength*", and then he continues, speaking in God's name, "*but I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*". From Isaiah's point of view, we live at the ends of the earth, and precisely there has been given a light that isn't to be hidden but set on a lampstand so all may see it and come to know God.

We don't know how to make our witness effective. Try as we might, that has to be left to God. Salvation is God's to give and hearts are God's to move. We just have to agree to bear whatever cross may be needed to make that light enter into and transform those whom God calls. When Jesus was presented in the Temple two prophets came forward to remind Mary and Joseph that their son would bear a cross and seemingly be rejected by many, and that they too would experience that cross. That is why as we recalled that event, and the Feast of the Presentation, we were given a call to Gospel heroism. It may seem that we do nothing heroic but that is for God to decide, and for those who come after us to recognize. Our task is simply to obey: Let your word, O Lord, be done in me. Come, Lord, and be my strength and consolation, and my victory.

Friday

THE MONASTIC WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A reflection inspired by a text of Jean Danielou

Christian monks have always found in John the Baptist as a forerunner and model. In part, this is because everything that John did pointed to Jesus Christ as Savior, and that is what Christian monks witness to by their very existence. At a deeper level, it is because monks understand themselves as deliberately taking up the Cross of Christ, completing as St. Paul says whatever is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the Church and the world.

Compare the passion of John the Baptist with that of Jesus. John spoke the word of God to King Herod (the grandson of King Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was yet a baby). Herod had been maneuvered, and willingly enough, into marrying the wife of his brother, Philip. Herodias wanted to be a great person in the world and thought she had a better chance with Herod than with Philip so she left Philip and married Herod. John told Herod this was contrary to the Law of God. For daring to do this he was put in prison. Herodias looked for a way to have him executed.

John suffered and died because he got in the way of ambition and a search for worldly power and glory. Jesus died for roughly the same reason. Christian monks have always seen in John's sufferings and murder, as in those of Jesus, a picture of what they have to witness against and for. A monk seeks God first and last and always, and bears witness to the fact that all are called to do this, especially Christian believers. People, monks included, are always struggling with their habitual ways of thinking about what makes life good and pleasant and so tend to put the quest for a pleasant life ahead of the quest for union with God.

The ancient Egyptian monks paid close attention to their dreams and fantasies (daydreams) because these show how one is hanging onto "worldly" ways of thinking or making progress in letting go of them. They regularly told a "Spiritual Father", another monk long tested in monastic conversion, what was going on in their dreams and fantasies so they wouldn't forget to keep struggling. Herodias, and King Herod himself, weren't even struggling, as most people seemingly aren't.

John the Baptist and Jesus both died rather than be disloyal to the vocation God had given them to call people away from such fantasies to living a divine love. First, they tell the truth about life's meaning and about wrong headed efforts to make it better. Second, they help others see how to live in a way that opens one to the grace of becoming like God. That is also the vocation of a Christian monk and the meaning of monastic asceticism. It is why monks thought of themselves as undergoing a kind of martyrdom by devoting themselves wholly to the search for union with God. The Herods and Herodias of every time and place need this witness, and so do monks. So God has called us all to love one another as Jesus has loved us and to give witness to this call in the way we live.

Saturday

THE VIRGIN MARY AS GOD'S TEMPLE

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Yves Congar

The Gospels expressly relate the Virgin Mary to the Temple of God only in the accounts of her presentation of Jesus and of the events of a family journey to celebrate the Passover at the Temple when Jesus was twelve. Christian piety added things, as in various Apocryphal texts, but the Church insists the Gospels say more than enough. We deal with symbolic representations of profound spiritual realities.

Mary was chosen and predestined to be the mother of Jesus, true God, and truly human, and was made worthy of her vocation by grace. She shows us how to live such a vocation with unflinching fidelity. The gospel of Luke presents her as a model to be imitated by all Christian believers striving to respond to the vocations God gives them. Mary is, next to her Son, the first of the living stones out of which God is building a temple so all may worship and find grace-given salvation.

If Mary is the Mother of God she has a special relation to the Body of Christ. But this Body is the true Temple. This is true of Christ's physical body too but most particularly of what we call Christ's "mystical" body, the Church. Consider why this is so pertinent to understanding the role of Mary in God's plan of salvation. First, because Christ lives and grows within her she is the Temple of God in a unique way. Yet Christ lives and grows within us spiritually and so makes us temples of God. Second, because of the grace that filled Mary, she was able to respond completely and without reservation to the call of God to become his mother. Yet we too have been given graces to enable us to respond to God's calls to us.

It is not difficult to see how Mary provides a model for all Christians to follow as they seek to respond to God's call to bring light to the world and to lead every member of the human race to the salvation which God offers all in Christ. If we find this filled with difficulties so did Mary. If we have to carry a cross with Jesus, so did Mary. If we have to let go of our own plans for life, that is precisely what God's call required of Mary. She responded freely and fully to each call to surrender herself and her ways of thinking and feeling to the requirements of God's Plan of Salvation through her son. All this makes her more and more a temple where worship of God and prayer to God filled each day and hour more and more. She, and all believers, have been made, as it were, pregnant with Christ and salvation. What are we to do in response if not to go to whoever we know to be in need—as Mary did to Elizabeth—and show them love and mercy?