

Christmas 1C (12/27/09 – *The Peace of Christ ... in His Temple*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

From Friday until today – *The First Sunday after Christmas* – 40 days have passed in our *Holy Gospel* readings. That’s what St. Luke is telling us when he says: ***And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses*** [LK 2.22]. This is the Virgin Mary’s purification from ceremonial uncleanness after giving birth to the Word-made-Flesh – in accord with God’s command in LEVITICUS 12. And because our Lord Jesus Christ is Mary’s Firstborn, our Lord’s Presentation in the Temple is also His consecration according to God’s command – as we heard in our *Old Testament Reading* from EXODUS 13[1-2]: ***The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine.”***

In this Holy Scripture we see the devout nature of Mary the Mother of Our Lord ... and of our Lord’s guardian/step-father, Joseph. They are doing exactly what God has commanded them through Moses. But this will be no ordinary fulfilling of the Law – for this Firstborn is no ordinary son ... but the Son of God in human flesh. Standing in the Temple courtyard are two faithful servants of God who are waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promises: devout Simeon and elderly Anna. And what we hear from their mouths is nothing less than astounding!

From the mouth of ***righteous and devout*** Simeon [LK 2.25] we receive the words we usually sing after Holy Communion ... the *Nunc Dimittis*: ***Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your Salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a Light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the Glory of Your people Israel.*** [LK 2.29-32]. These words first and foremost tell us about the 40-day-old Infant Jesus – and thus they also teach how it is that Simeon ... and all believers ... are made ***righteous and devout*** by God.

But then, Luke has already hinted at the “how” – for he says that Simeon was ***waiting for the consolation of Israel*** and was waiting to see ***the Lord’s Christ***, as the Holy Spirit had revealed to him [2.26]. You see, Simeon knows what you and I need to know and be constantly reminded of – that he

is a sinner ... in desperate need of the consolation, comfort, and encouragement that **only** come from the Messiah, the Christ. Simeon was *waiting for the consolation of Israel* because sinners like him (and **us**) **need** the consolation that only comes from sins forgiven by God for Jesus' sake.

What Simeon had been waiting for his entire life – and especially since the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Savior – now had finally appeared. The Lord comes to His Temple – the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world comes already 33 days after His circumcision to the place of sacrifice ... in anticipation of that day 33 years later when He would offer Himself as sacrifice for the purification of **all** sins upon the altar of His Cross. Now Simeon knows that he can *depart* the Temple ... even this life ... *in peace*. For he has beheld ... seen ... touched ... and carried in his sinful yet forgiven arms the very Salvation of God.

You see, Salvation is not just a concept ... not merely an act ... but a Person Who acts – Jesus the Christ ... the long-promised Savior. Here is the Word-made-Flesh that St. John calls *the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world* [JN 1.9] in the *Christmas Morning Gospel*. Jesus is the Light Who reveals Himself as Savior not only of the Jews ... but also of the Gentiles ... of **you** and me! Here is the Glory of Israel ... incarnate. Here is the Glory of God ... in Infant flesh. So, having now seen this saving, consoling Christ, Simeon blesses God – **and us** – by simply declaring this truth for Mary and Joseph and Anna and all the world to hear.

Now Mary and Joseph are understandably a bit awestruck by this. They come to the Temple to fulfill God's holy will – to fulfill the Law – and they hear the Gospel. Light ... Glory ... Salvation – that's what they've been carrying about ... that's Who they've been caring for! But Simeon isn't done "blessing." He will bless Mary and Joseph, too – **especially** Mary. *Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.* [LK 2.34-35] A strange sort of blessing, this! Not the way we generally think of blessings. Here Simeon's blessing is simply proclaiming the truth about this blessed Child – even those portions of the truth that aren't very positive.

You see, the Scriptural understanding of blessing – the word behind our English *blessing* – is basically *to speak well of*. Simeon blesses God by publicly recounting what God has done and is doing – saving the world from sin by His Son, Who this day is consecrated. In Simeon’s blessing of Joseph and Mary, he simply declares the truth of the Christ-Child’s future – even the part that shall hurt Mary’s heart. For God’s truth is **always** a blessing. And what God ordains is **always** good ... and therefore always a **blessing** – even when it may not seem so at first ... even when our reason and flesh sees it rather as a curse. God’s good is **never** bad for us – even when we don’t like it ... even when it hurts ... indeed, even when it at first drags us almost to the grave. So we see and learn from these inspired blessings through the mouth of *righteous and devout* Simeon that true praise and blessing – true speaking well – of God comes **not** from our own thoughts on God and what He has done, but is simply declaring the truth that God has revealed to us. In this way above all we bless God and rightly worship Him. Our blessing and praise of God in the *Divine Service*, therefore, is not a fawning over God with typical “praise type” language, but a public and corporate repeating of what God has already said – about Himself ... about us ... about our sin ... about our Savior from sin, Jesus Christ.

In blessing Mary – in speaking well to Mary – Simeon simply declares the truth. This long-promised Savior – the Word-made-Flesh she conceived and bore and now brings to the Temple – will be a great Divider among Israel (and all mankind). As the Savior Himself says some thirty years later: *from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three* [LK 12.52]. You are either **for** Him ... or **against** Him – there is no fence-sitting, middle ground with Christ. Many will stumble and fall because of Him – He shall be a sign that is opposed, spoken against, rejected ... even murdered. This is the work of the sinful flesh – a flesh that you and I and all people have ... do not be deceived. Your own flesh stumbles and falls against Christ the Chief Cornerstone every time it wills to act according to its own sinful desires.

But Simeon’s blessing also holds out the promise – *Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and RISING of many in Israel*. When we have stumbled and dashed our foot against **this** Stone ... when we fall into sin and

are crushed by the Law's righteous requirements ... when we are brought to realize our sin against God and one another, **then** this Child also causes us to rise ... from the depths of our sin ... from the hell of our condemnation ... and eventually from the grave of our death. He raises us up from our hopeless situation and comforts us with the most blessed consolation and encouragement of sins forgiven for **His** sake ... of relationship restored between us and God for **His** sake ... of lost paradise regained for **His** sake.

This Law-and-Gospel dichotomy – that Christ *is appointed for the fall and rising of many* – is the two-edged sword that also pierces Mary's soul. For just as the perfect yet humble righteousness of this Child will cause Mary to see her own lack of righteousness ... then by God's grace to cling to Him in faith – so Christ and His two-edged Word of Law and Gospel reveals the hearts of **all** people. He shall be for the fall of many who oppose Him and remain in their sins – but for the raising up of many others who (after their hearts have been pierced by the sword of the Law) take up Christ in the arms of faith.

And here within the Sanctuary of this House of God – upon the Altar of the Lord – Christ once again comes in the Temple of His Body and Blood to bring us Good Tidings of great joy ... and peace ... already here on earth. After kneeling at the rail **you** are able to depart in peace because of God's Word of forgiveness. And you speak with Simeon of old the words of the *Nunc Dimittis: Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your Salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a Light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the Glory of Your people Israel.* For here in this place **your** eyes have seen the Salvation of God ... and heard of His redemption. And **you** have cradled Christ ... in the flesh ... in His Body and His Blood. Here Christ the Light has revealed to **you** the Father's gracious face ... and enlightened **your** heart with the light of His Gospel. Here you know the Glory of God – the glorious Son Who willingly came to be opposed, rejected, and crucified to work your forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Therefore you are able to *depart in peace* ... and in great Christmas joy.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]