

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

When the days were completed for their purification
according to the law of Moses,
They took him up to Jerusalem
to present him to the Lord,
just as it is written in the law of the Lord,
Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,
and to offer the sacrifice of
a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,
in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.
This man was righteous and devout,
awaiting the consolation of Israel,
and the Holy Spirit was upon him.
It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit
that he should not see death
before he had seen the Christ of the Lord.
He came in the Spirit into the temple;
and when the parents brought in the child Jesus
to perform the custom of the law in regard to him,
He took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:
"Now, Master, you may let your servant go
in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel."
The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him;
and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,
"Behold, this child is destined
for the fall and rise of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be contradicted
—and you yourself a sword will pierce—
so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."
There was also a prophetess, Anna,
the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.
She was advanced in years,
having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage,
and then as a widow until she was eighty-four.
She never left the temple,
but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.
And coming forward at that very time,
she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child
to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions
of the law of the Lord,

they returned to Galilee,
to their own town of Nazareth.
The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom;
and the favor of God was upon him.

RAW/UNEDITED TRANSCRIPTION OF THE GOSPEL STUDY

Gospel Study – *Light One Candle*

This Gospel, the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, is a delightful Gospel because it honors two wisdom figures that grandparents can identify with. These are two elderly people who, in their senior years, are full of the Spirit and have a tremendous effect not only on Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but as this Gospel is proclaimed, their lives are a witness down through generation after generation. I imagine most of us would like to be able to do that ourselves. I invite us to look at this Gospel as a way of seeing how we can be a light to the nations as Christ Himself was.

The opening scene begins with Luke explaining that Joseph and Mary wanted to follow the prescription of the Law and dedicate their son to the Lord in the Temple of Jerusalem. In the book of Leviticus it is written and prescribed that the first-born son was to be consecrated to the Lord, however it did not state that you had to do this in Jerusalem. Luke is making a special point that Mary and Joseph are traveling all the way from Nazareth, down to Jerusalem—a journey of several days and some difficulty—in order to go the extra mile to consecrate their son to the Lord. Their journey reminds us how we make a point to baptize our children, bringing them to church, to dedicate and consecrate their lives to the Lord. I'm sure many parents can identify with this. Baptismal ceremonies are very important ceremonies of commitment to Christ. We imitate that beautiful tradition of the Jewish people in the ritual of our Baptismal commitment.

Then Luke mentions—and it appears almost like a footnote, but it's a footnote that's very revealing—that Mary and Joseph had sacrificed a pair of turtle doves. In the same passage from Leviticus that asks for this consecration of the first-born child, it specifies that you should offer a year-old lamb unless you could not afford it, in which case you could offer a turtle dove or a couple of pigeons. The point that the Jewish people would have immediately understood is that Mary and Joseph are not wealthy; they could not afford a yearling lamb and therefore had to give the best they could give which was two turtle doves.

Now, we are told, there lived in Jerusalem at the time, a man named Simeon. He was just and pious. The Jewish people use that as a euphemism to say, he followed the Law of the Lord. He was what we would know to be truly holy; full of love for the Lord and His people. He trusted, we are told, that God's promise would be fulfilled; that consolation would come to Israel. This is the Messianic promise given long ago, beginning with David, that the Messiah would come to redeem Israel. Simeon held on to this faith, but what's really fascinating is the mention that the Holy Spirit was upon him. We see a great evidence of this because it was the Spirit that led him to the Temple at this time. We are told that he came to the Temple inspired by the Spirit, just as the parents brought in the Christ child to perform their customary ritual. He took Jesus in his arms and blessed God. Isn't it wonderful to see how God works, how God's Spirit literally moves

us to some people and some places and at some time? It is for a special mission to be accomplished.

I would guess that many of you can recall a time when you didn't quite understand why, but the Spirit led you to a certain person to say a certain thing that turned out to be very important for that person. Or, the Spirit led you to a situation and you didn't even identify it as the Spirit at first, it's just like this intuition, or this thought came to your mind. But, as you look back, you see it was really inspired or Spirit-led. Can you think of those times? It's wonderful to consider. I remember a time I was led by the Spirit. I was downtown here attending a meeting, but I was a half hour early which is very uncommon for me. I thought that I should stop into the Cathedral for a short visit and prayer. I sat down, just upstairs in our Cathedral church, and was praying. I had this strong sense of the Lord saying that He was calling me here to the Cathedral which I immediately put out of my mind as being a crazy thought because I have these crazy thoughts all the time. Sorting them out gets to be a chore at times, but it kept coming and I had a sense of God's presence which was baffling to me. I then just said, 'Well Lord whatever,' left and went to my meeting. Afterwards I went back to St. George Parish (where I was stationed at the time) and there waiting for me was a phone message to call the Pastor of this Cathedral. It took me a day before we got in touch with each other and he said, "Jim, I'd like to invite you to consider coming here as Associate Pastor of the Cathedral." I said, 'Oh, my Lord.'

Now that is rare. Nevertheless, if we have our antennae out and ready to pick up the signals of the Spirit that often times I think we just dismiss or don't tune into, I believe we would be led to certain people, or certain places. We would be led to do certain things, or say a certain word, or offer a certain favor. This is a very significant or important effect on others and for God's work in our lives.

I suggest that Simeon was a truly holy man—holy meaning open to being used and led by the Spirit. He was open to letting the Spirit speak through him (as we would now interpret his actions). We see a sign of this because the Spirit led him just at the right time, just to the right place. The Temple is very large; it's like this Cathedral, only larger. It had many courtyards, so how did he come just at the time when he, as it were, ran into the holy family? Is this what some people call coincidence, or God-incidence as I like to call it. God-incidence or providence, that is God's guidance.

When it happens in this Gospel, we see Simeon taking Jesus into his arms. I see this often when your children, grandchildren or friends carry a baby. When you see a loved one's child don't you just want to take him or her into your arms out of love? Many times you can feel that love move you just to hold the child; certainly that's what was moving in Simeon's heart. It also suggests a deeper desire to embrace the Lord who he knew and recognized to be the Savior. Simeon literally entered into this intimate relationship. When Jesus comes to us, He awaits for all of us to have and hold Him and bring Him into our hearts and into our homes. He comes to us, but it's up to us to come to Him and enter into that deeper friendship, that deeper relationship with Him.

When Simeon then holds the Christ, it is like the Spirit of Christ comes into Him and he's overcome to speak this beautiful prayer which we refer to as *Simeon's Canticle*. For those familiar with the liturgy of hours, this is the prayer said at night time because it's the beautiful

prayer of a man in the evening of his own life thanking God for this blessing he has long awaited would come. He says, "Now master you can dismiss your servant in peace for you have fulfilled your word." It's like, 'Lord, now I'm ready to come home to you because my life's greatest desire is fulfilled. For my eyes have witnessed your saving deed, displayed for all people to see.'

Who is seeing it? Right now, only Simeon you see. He says it so that others can see it as well. Do you see what a prophet he is? Do you see how inspired he is? He doesn't keep this to himself. He's saying this for all in the Temple to hear just as we need to give witness to all in our church, or in our families, so that others can come into this same intimate relationship with the Lord.

Then, Simeon proclaims this beautiful line to Jesus that He is a revealing light to the nations; a revealing light. A light that enlightens, that illumines, our life, the glory of your people Israel. What a beautiful statement. Now when Simeon speaks with this kind of wisdom, it's the wisdom of an elder all right, an elder of the church. But he speaks also with divine inspiration as a prophet. He says, "This child (that he's holding now) is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel. A sign that will be opposed." And he looks to Mary and he says, "And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword so that the many thoughts of hearts will be laid bare." He's looking at Jesus and saying, 'This child will be the pride and joy of Israel. That's the good news. He is the fulfillment of what we're all waiting for.'

You can almost see our elders holding out their faith to us. This is what life's about. Take it from me, they say, I've learned after a while you lose your health—I once thought health was everything. After a while you lose your wealth—I thought wealth was everything. Then I discovered the only thing that's everything is the Lord and His love and our faith in Him. Our elders hand that on to us. Simeon comes to hand on the Christ child but he prophesizes to us that this will be to our joy but for some this Christ will be their downfall. For some it will raise them up, but for others be their downfall. That was a prophesy because in Jesus' time, and in Jesus' life, many would receive Him and many would reject Him and He would be received with acclamation and persecution and, ultimately, with crucifixion.

Simeon was prophesying what indeed would happen. Looking to Mary he says, what certainly I imagine he could say to every mother, and perhaps father, here today who has ever borne and had children, "A sword will pierce your heart." Certainly to have children means at sometimes to have pride and joy and at other times sorrow and suffering. Isn't that true? That's just the truth. For those who love, it is the greatest gift of life but it's the hardest gift to bear because it will be a burden at times. That's the nature of love. We will give ourselves. No one knew that more than Mary, but Mary stands for us. Luke's trying to say, 'In Mary we see every disciple; every follower of Jesus.' We all know the Christian life is not an easy life. It is the road less traveled and so we have to keep reminding ourselves, 'Life is difficult and it's a long hard journey to Jesus.'

Now, once we see Simeon, we immediately are invited to welcome another beautiful holy woman, the prophetess Anna. Anna herself is in old age and knew hardship because she was married seven years but a widow ever since. To be a widow in the time of Christ was a severe hardship. That means you had no income; no social security. You had to rely totally on the charity of your family and other people. But here was a holy woman who trusted in God. She

was seen in the Temple every day praying and fasting constantly. She reminds me of the holy women found in every Parish who spend a lot of time in church. Perhaps sometimes we take them for granted, but Luke holds up this woman and reminds us, 'Never, never think little of these people for they are God's special ones.' They are like these pillars holding up this church; they are the pillars of the Church because of their prayers, and their fasting. So much of Church is able to continue on for us because they have given their lives. We are the beneficiaries of so many faithful grandparents in our Church who, because of them and their generosity, we are able to enjoy all that we do in the Church life.

Anna is also led by the Spirit to come at this time, to this special place, to meet Jesus. Luke holds her up as the first evangelist. She is the first one in Luke's Gospel to turn around and share with others, 'Here is the one that we have been waiting for.' And she began to give thanks to God and talk about this child as looking forward to deliverance of Israel (or Jerusalem).

Once I came to a meeting and was giving a talk on evangelization. It was a Saturday morning and of course some families have too much going on in their lives so often times it's just the older women of the Parish who come. I don't know where the older men are—maybe watching football games? But anyway, I at first felt discouraged but then I was reminded of Anna. Now here are the women who really build the Church. Luke holds them up as the most powerful Apostles and disciples. This is very telling because in Jesus' day a woman could not be an official witness in court. Her word was not always invited or respected in her society. See how counter-cultural God is and Jesus' ways are? He uses anybody—in fact he seems to prefer the humble and simple—and that's what he will do all throughout Luke's Gospel. He takes the little people and the elderly whom we often overlook and we often fail to ask for their advice. He says, 'Now look and listen to them because they are the first prophets. They are the first place where God speaks.' Wow. I'm telling you, that's a powerful lesson for us.

Sometimes in suffering you give the loudest witness. This was certainly the case in Cardinal Bernardin's death because he suffered and took his cross and carried it. That witness spoke volumes more than any of the sermons he spoke or the talks he had written. The way he died gave birth to new faith of so many people. One man was so inspired that he called the Bishop of Gary Indiana, the Diocese adjacent to Chicago, and said he would like to donate all his hospital equipment and the Bishop said, "What's this about?" The man said, "I owned and ran three abortion clinics but I was so inspired by Cardinal Bernardin's death and faith in accepting death that I realized the precious gift of life which is what he tried to say time and again." Isn't that something? Now we have to believe that God will use us in our suffering. I don't think it will be quite so dramatic or fantastic but don't you think it will have a deep influence on our family?

What we see in this Gospel is a beautiful picture of what the Lord wants for all of us to experience and then to share which is to receive this revealing light and then to reflect that light to others. On February 2nd, we celebrate what is commonly called the Candle Mass, or Candlemas. Traditionally, this is the day we bless candles in Church recalling Simeon's words that Jesus is the revealing light to the gentiles and to all people. The light, the candle, has always been, the most wonderful and traditional symbol of Christ Himself who said, "I am the light of the World." He came into the world so that those who are walking in darkness will no longer walk in darkness but walk in the light of His truth and love. And Jesus comes, and we see in this

candle then, Christ who's ever before us. I have found that the candle is the most beautiful symbol for prayer. Here is what I try to do each night: I turn off my bedroom light and light a candle and begin my evening prayer much in the spirit of Simeon. I reflect back on my day and try to see where I encountered Jesus. I ask for the enlightenment that Christ—who is before me, as I can see in the candle—wants to give me. After seeing that enlightenment I can give thanks and then rest in peace because I will feel His presence and providence.

Often I fail to do this deep enough or long enough, saying, "Oh Lord make this quick." He must get used to this—I do it almost every night I thin—because I'm really tired at night. So then I go to bed, but my mind keeps racing and my heart keeps tossing and turning, you know why? Because I still haven't presented all that's in me to the Lord. I do not do this well, but I do know enough of what I should do better. As I light this candle, this little ritual that I have at night, I just welcome you to it. If we light a candle at night and pray that Jesus come to us and give us peace and go over the day we can present to Him what's churning or worrying us. We present it to the Lord as Mary and Joseph presented their child to the Lord. Ask the Lord to consecrate it. Dedicate it to Him. Ask His help with it. The more I turn over to the Lord the more I find myself sleeping in peace.

The beauty about this too is that Jesus not only said, "I am the light of the world," He also said to His disciples, "You are the light of the world, so let your light shine." In the candle we not only see the light of Christ who comes to us to enlighten and illumine us, but we also see a reflection of that light within our hearts. If we carry that faith in Jesus—that love for the Lord and for others—then we become a bright light in people's lives. Think of the Anna's in your life. I think of my own grandmother who was that bright light, who prayed constantly. She always prayed 3-5 rosaries a day and I was so grateful that I was one of her intentions every day. I've learned to do this now, only recently. I keep a list of people that I pray for and I hope that that light goes to them; anyone who comes to me with a serious concern. I have a cancer list. I have of course all my family and friends and the people who are put in my trust for Spiritual Direction or come to me in counseling that need help. I have a short list and a long list of people that I always pray for and people who I pray for a term of a month or so.

I encourage you to take time to pray for people and you will bring the light of the world to them in God's good way and time. I present this candle as a symbol of ourselves and of the Lord especially. I offer these suggestions that the candle can teach us many lessons. One might be that Christ always comes to enlighten us with His wisdom and enkindle us with His love, but notice that the wick can be easily snuffed out. It needs to be protected and so does our faith, so does our faith. But this flickering flame can brighten an entire room which is the case I discover every night and yet that same light can start a fire and destroy a whole house. What that says to me is that there is such tremendous potential in all of us, for good and for evil. But if we only knew the potential for good, how much more we would say that compliment; how much more we would offer that friendship; how much more we would extend ourselves in charity and service to others in random acts of kindness. Those are the actions by which that light spreads. We need to do it, so be a light as Jesus said. Don't put it under a bushel basket. Put it on a stand. Let people see your goodness that they give praise to God.

The other lesson of course is that (obviously) no normal candle should burn at both ends. The lesson is clear, I try to remind myself, that we shouldn't try to do too much in our day, otherwise we too will quickly burn out and be good for nobody. We can only do so much. But the last lesson is that this candle does finally burn itself out and it extinguishes itself—as it were, sacrifices itself—in order to give light just as Jesus did for us. He gave His life that we might have eternal life and eternal light with Him forever. So if we are to give ourselves, not in any unhealthy way, but in a most holy way, we are to sacrifice ourselves for those the Lord has given to us to love. Amen.