

Sunday 31st December 2017: FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS. YR B.

Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Ps 148; Galatians 4:4-7

Gospel: Lk 2:22-40

“Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted . . .”

May I speak in the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, through the written word, and the spoken word, may we know your Living Word Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen

In today's Gospel, the faithful Joseph and Mary bring their son to the temple for his presentation to the Lord, a ritual required by the Law. The Book of Exodus taught that a family's first-born son “belonged” to the Lord who saved them when the first-born sons of the Egyptians were destroyed at the first Passover (Exodus 13: 15).

The prophet Simeon and the prophetess Anna are idealised portraits of the faithful “remnant” of Israel awaiting the Messiah's coming. Simeon's canticle praises God for the universal salvation that will be realised in Jesus; in his prophecy, the shadow of the cross falls upon the Holy Family.

Anna, as an elderly widow, is considered among the most vulnerable and poor of society. Her encounter with the child typifies the theme woven throughout Luke's Gospel: the exaltation of society's poorest and most humble by God.

In Matthew and Luke's stories of Jesus birth and childhood (which were later additions to those Gospels, drawn from the many stories about Jesus' life that were part of the early Christian oral tradition that had developed), life for the family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus is difficult and cruel: they are forced from their home; they are innocent victims of the political and social tensions of their time; they endure the suspicions of their own people when Mary's pregnancy is discovered; their child is born under the most difficult and terrifying of circumstances; they experience the agony of losing their beloved child. And yet, through it all, their love and faithfulness to one another do not waver. The Holy Family is a model for our families as we confront the many tensions and crises that threaten the stability, peace and unity that are the joys of being a family.

Today's Feast of the Holy Family calls us to re-discover and celebrate our own families as harbours of forgiveness and understanding and safe places of unconditional love, welcome and acceptance.

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The examples of Simeon and Anna can not only be inspiring to us. They can also raise questions. And especially when we live in a culture that so highly prizes fast results and a quick fix to our problems, the most obvious challenge that they present is surely to our own patience and perseverance. More specifically, when the going gets tough or when God's promises seem delayed, how much are we prepared to hang in there? How willing are we to fast and pray? How ready are we to stay focused and wait patiently, like Simeon and Anna, however long it takes?

Because today's Gospel also reminds us of one last point that is so important, which is that, whatever our struggles or issues, with God, our patience will be rewarded.

So the wait is always worthwhile.

Our problems may not be resolved and our needs or desires may not be met exactly as we want. The ultimate outcome may not be what we hoped for and we may never even see it in this life at all. But if we keep our focus in the right place and we are ready to wait on God's timing, our prayers will eventually be answered.

God will be faithful to us in His promises, just as God was to Simeon and Anna. And what is the greatest answer to prayer that we can ever receive? In the midst of the busy Jerusalem temple, as Mary and Joseph go about their business, Luke 2 makes it so crystal-clear, because the answer is right there in their arms.

As Simeon and Anna discover, when their long and prayerful wait finally comes to an end, all that they have ever been longing or hoping or dreaming for, is found in the presence of one unique person, God in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ. And when they meet him, whenever anyone truly encounters him in faith, their lives are never ever the same again.

The prophet Simeon proclaims that this child will be a "light" for Israel — but that light will endure great suffering and pain before finally shattering the darkness. Luke's Gospel of the Child Jesus reminds us that the crib is overshadowed by the cross, that this holy birth is the beginning of humankind's rebirth in the Resurrection.

Amen.