

Presentation of the Lord

Feast of the Presentation

February 02, 2020

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

Today is a smash up of liturgical feasts. First, traditionally it's the feast of the presentation of the Lord to the temple. What is that? In the Judaism of Jesus day, your first born son belonged to God and parents needed to "buy him back" forty days after his birth by offering a sacrifice. This tradition is traced back to Abraham and Isaac. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his first born son, and then relents, and gives him back at the last moment. In thanksgiving, Abraham sacrifices a ram caught in a nearby thorn bush. The ritual called for the sacrifice of a lamb, but poor people could substitute a pair of turtle doves, or alternatively two pigeons—which I think is a stroke of genius for containing the pigeon population in the temple precincts. Mary and Joseph, though poor, did have some class apparently. They chose turtle doves.

At the same time the mother is ritually purified from the messiness of childbirth. In childbirth she is made "unclean." Today she is ritually purified and so can re-enter the temple without defiling it.

Today is also Candlemas—the feast of the blessing of candles. This is a tradition in the Western Church that dates back to the 11th century. It is occasioned by a line in the canticle of Simeon occasioned by the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Simeon praises the child Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel." It begins everyone bringing candles. There is then a candle-lit procession entering a darkened the church while the Canticle of Simeon was chanted.. Why get your candles blessed? Well, in the days before light bulbs, candles can be dangerous. As Mark and Kelly, Randy and Carl, can tell you, if you are not careful, they can burn down your house. Spokane had a "great fire" downtown in 1889, only 8 years after its official incorporation. So did every other city in America.

And its Groundhog day! Six weeks after the winter solstice and six weeks before the spring equinox, the groundhog climbs out of his burrow to see how winter is going. If he sees his shadow he scrambles back and hunkers down for six more weeks of cold weather.

Before the arrival of Christianity in Scotland and Ireland it was the Celtic feast of the goddess Imbolc later baptized as St. Brigid. For the Celts today marked the end of the worst of winter, which before potatoes, was a pretty lean time for peasants. In the words of the Beatles: "Here comes the sun. Here comes the sun.....Its all right."

So like I said, this is a day of rituals. Sacred rituals are important—they are embodied prayers. I believe they can be effective whether or not you are paying attention while praying them. Even if you are distracted, you are developing muscle memory. They punctuate our profane life with sacred moments to remind us of what matters and what doesn't so much.

For Jews, it's a reminder to parents that they do not own their children. They are theirs, but not only theirs. Rather they have been called by God to raise them with the understanding that their child is also God's child.

And for us Christians it is the final, last feast marking the birth of Jesus and the coming of the Messiah. Christmas is finally over. And Mary and Joseph have been given their marching orders. It is for them to write the first chapter of the life of their son Jesus. His last chapter is already adumbrated in Simeon's blessing:

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 hearts of many may be laid bare.

Children are blessings. But it's a rare parent whose heart has not been pierced in some way or other by the end of their story. May this day remind us of our calling to raise the next generation. May it remind us of who we are, and who they are destined to become.