

Presentation of the Lord
(Malachi 3:1-4 / Luke 2:22-40)
02.02.2016

The parents of Jesus brought their child up to the temple to present Him to the Lord. They came to make their offering in accordance with the Law. The offering referred to in the text is that of the poor: *two turtle doves or two young pigeons*.

This shows us that what really matters is not so much the offering itself as the attitude of heart that accompanies it.

The infant brought before God to be offered we know to be none other than the source of life Himself. What is illustrated for us in this story and further underlined for us by the fact that the offering made is that of the poor are those words of the apostle Paul which we sang in a responsory at the Office of Vigils yesterday evening: *Rich though He was, He became poor for our sakes, so that we might be made rich out of His poverty*.

Francis of Assisi's words resonate in our hearts as we witness this display of humility: *O poverty, source of true riches*.

Are we not led today to think of and give thanks for the gift of our existential poverty which permits us to experience the riches of God's mercy?

Again and again the Scriptures make the point that it is the heart that the Lord looks upon. God's interest is not outward show, but the attitude of one's heart.

The Lord's special favour reposes upon the poor of heart.

How important it is for all of us to be constantly brought back to the heart of matters: to be constantly drawn back to our own hearts – our own poor hearts – which we are all called to give to the Lord.

I hear the first and basic call of today's feast to be a call to wholeheartedness: a call to renew the consecration of our lives to the Lord, holding nothing back: holding back neither our riches, nor our poverty.

Quite often what we have the most difficulty offering to God (and to others) is our poverty. We can find it harder to let go of and make a gracious gift of our poverty than to let go of and offer our riches.

It would be no bad thing for all of us to ask ourselves today just what the two young pigeons in our lives might be. By that I mean that each one of us would do well to ask him or her self just what poverty in our lives it may be that the Lord is waiting for us to hand over to Him?

When we look at any child of the age Jesus was when He was brought to the temple, what do we see?

We see a helpless, vulnerable, little infant.

This leads me to reflect that we are given to see in our contemplation of the mystery of Jesus' Presentation in the temple is precisely what the Lord awaits from us today: the offering of our helplessness, our vulnerability, our littleness.

While we would like to be able to offer to the Lord our strengths, our riches and our greatness, what He most longs for from us is that we have the simplicity of heart, the confidence and the trust required, to be able to offer to Him our weakness, our frailty, our insignificance.

The Lord wants us to see that our poverty is also part (and indeed at the heart) of the gift we bring and offer to Him today.

None of us – no matter how rich we may be in certain domains of our make-up – is devoid of areas of poverty and even misery in our lives. These areas of our lives that are marked by our fragility are as important to God as are our riches. The Lord wants us to be able to make a joyous – not a begrudging – offering of our poverty to Him.

God's desire for us is that we may find relief and comfort to know that we are welcomed by Him. He longs for us to realise that His gracious acceptance excludes nothing that is part of who and what we are.

The parents of Jesus brought Him up to what the psalmist calls *the House of the Lord*. We have come to *the Lord's house* as we gather here this morning.

It is important for us to realise that not only does the Lord welcome us into His house this day, but He comes to meet us here. Our Eastern brothers and sisters call this feast *the meeting of God with His people*.

The Lord comes to meet us here. He comes to make His home in our wounded hearts. However broken we may know ourselves to be, *we are temples of His Spirit*.

If only we realised that in our lives *all is pure gift!*

If we truly realised that, then so much of what we reject in ourselves, and which we are therefore held back from offering to God, would be released into our oblation.

It is important for us to realise that our poverty, our weakness, our wounds, can become part of our way to God and recognised to be the way through which the Lord chooses to come to us!

The scene of the Presentation in the temple shows God come to meet humanity in and through the poor offering that was made that day by Joseph and Mary.

There is something deeply consoling to think that two young pigeons marked the consecration of the child Jesus who was God made man.

What God needs to find in us if He is to make His home in our hearts is nothing other than an empty space, which we might take as just a void, but which is (certainly can become) the throne made ready to welcome the coming of His reign in our lives.

Once we realise this a profound shift takes place within us.

Our vulnerability – which will have made us feel so uncomfortable hitherto and led us to behave as ever so defensive and self-protective – can now be experienced as a grace, something immensely freeing.

When we realise this, then we come to recognise that what matters much more than anything we have earned is what is given as God's pure gift in our lives. With this realisation, so many of the unnecessary pressures we create for ourselves can give way to God's freeing grace at work in our hearts.

Someone who is a person of great riches in so many domains of his life – spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, a man who fell ill, and who experienced the nature of his ill as a profound humiliation – shared his personal experience with me in this way: *Stripped naked, weakened and greatly humbled, I stopped fighting, first because I was defeated, but later, when strength and resources returned, because I realised there is no reason to fight.*

That man's experience could be – and I would dare to say, should be – ours.

If only we realised that there is no need to fight! There is no need for us to resist God's grace the way we do. There is no need to waste so much energy on our self-defensive ploys and mechanisms.

How liberating it is for us to come to realise that the pressures we put ourselves under by our need to perform, to achieve, to dominate, to be recognised and honoured, to possess and impress, to arrive at the goals we set ourselves to win the admiration, not to say the envy of others, don't really matter at the end of the day.

The call addressed to us invites us to realise that in the end *all is pure gift*. Bernanos and St Therese of Lisieux concur when they share this basic insight with us: *Tout est grace. All is grace.*

How freeing for us to hear that insight, how much more liberating still, when we start to live out of that insight!

All these considerations lead me to say that the gospel scene of the Presentation of Jesus is fundamentally disarming.

We see the child Jesus taken into the arms of a frail and elderly man to be carried and prophesied over by him.

We contemplate the aged widow, Anna, as she passes by that way and blesses God for what she witnesses.

Death beckons in the air: reference is made to *the fall and rising of many*: a mention of Christ's own passover is hidden therein.

The young couple probably failed to understand much of what they heard said – some of the words spoken by Simeon were certainly more challenging than they were encouraging. It was foretold that a sword would pierce Mary's heart, suffering still to come was announced here. Without any of those gathered around the Christ-child understanding everything, all who figure in this story nonetheless appear to be established in an attitude of confidence of heart, trust and peace.

Serenity reigns supreme in the scene depicted for us by the evangelist.

Once their offering is made to the Lord, all the participants in this story are consoled to know that God now has all in hand.

The invitation addressed to us today is to enter into this story and make it our own.

It is to see our lives as held in God's hands.

It is to be confident and trusting that, while we are fully aware of our frailty, God knows what is best for us and He watches over us.

How important for us to recall the truth of Paul's words: *God's grace is sufficient. It is enough for us. God's grace makes itself felt best in our human weakness.*

On this *Day of Consecrated Life* it is good for us to be reminded of this as we look at the fragile state of so many communities of Consecrated men and women in the Church today, including our own.

The call addressed to Consecrated men and women as we celebrate this feast is that addressed to them for all times: it is a call to renew and live their offering wholeheartedly.

May we renew and live *our* offering with all our hearts!

Like the child Jesus we do not hold all in hand. Rather, we are held in hand as He was.

Today's gospel story does not deny the pain involved in living one's offering in poverty of heart – neither should we.

But, whatever the pain involved, nothing should be allowed to hold us back from remaining faithfully engaged in the way we have chosen to walk in response to God's call.

At the heart of the Christian vocation is the call to conversion.

We Benedictines make a vow of *conversion of our whole way of life. Conversio morum.*

The Christ way – which is what conversion is all about – is outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount in the Beatitudes. Therein, this world's values are turned upside down.

Jesus' insights shared with us in the Beatitudes call upon us to look again at our values and priorities. His words would have each one of us reassess our whole self and our approach to life. What we read in the Beatitudes encourages us. Let us not be disheartened. Rather, let us engage ourselves to start afresh with Christ. May we be strengthened to begin life anew, entirely renewed in our whole approach to it.

While we might want to be strong and numerous – as so many monasteries once were – may we learn to be all the more authentic and committed as we strive to respond to God's call and serve the needs of the Church in our weakness and so small in number.

Words of St John-Paul II come to mind. I share them with you as an exhortation to take to heart this day: *Live to the full your dedication to God, so that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence.*

Those words speak to us as we celebrate this feast of light. They call upon us to bear a resplendent witness to Christ.

Let us recommit ourselves today to do just that. Let us strive to be, in the words of the apostle, *bright shining lights* in this somewhat sombre, darkened world.

May the darkness of our own hearts be scattered as we open our lives anew to what St Benedict calls *the deifying light* of Christ and His gospel!