

GOSPEL

LUKE 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

Before our eyes is a simple, humble and great fact: Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple of Jerusalem. He is a child like so many, like all, but he is unique: he is the Only Begotten who came for all. This Child has brought us the mercy and tenderness of God: Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy.

Today's celebration, especially in the East, is called the *feast of the encounter*. Essentially, in the Gospel that has been proclaimed, we see various encounters. In the temple *Jesus comes to meet us and we go to meet him*. We contemplate the encounter with the elderly Simeon, who represents Israel's faithful anticipation and the heartfelt jubilation for the fulfillment of the ancient promises. We also admire the encounter with the elderly prophetess Anna who, in seeing the Child, exults in joy and praises God. Simeon and Anna are *the anticipation and the prophecy*, Jesus is the novelty and the fulfillment: he is presented to us as the perennial surprise of God; concentrated in this Child born for all is *the past*, made of memory and of promise, and *the future*, full of hope.

We can see in this the beginning of consecrated life. *Consecrated men and women are called first and foremost to be men and women of encounter*. Indeed, the vocation does not originate from a plan we have designed "on the drawing board", but from a grace of the Lord which touches us, through a life-changing encounter. Those who truly encounter Jesus cannot remain the same as before. He is the novelty that makes all things new. Those who experience this encounter become witnesses and make the encounter possible for others; they also promote the culture of encounter, avoiding the self-referentiality that makes us stay closed off within ourselves.

The passage of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in order to encounter us, Jesus did not hesitate to share our human condition: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature" (Heb 2:14). Jesus did not save us "from the outside", he did not remain outside of our drama, but wanted to share our life.

The Gospel also tells us that "his father and his mother marvelled at what was said about him". Joseph and Mary safeguard the astonishment over this encounter full of light and hope for all peoples. We too, as Christians, are *guardians of astonishment*. An astonishment which requires ongoing renewal; woe to routine in spiritual life; woe to the crystallization of our [faith and gifts] in abstract documents. [The saints] were moved by the Spirit and were not afraid to soil their hands with everyday life, with the problems of the people, courageously moving along the geographical and existential peripheries. They did not halt in the face

of obstacles and the misunderstandings of others, because they kept in their heart the astonishment over the encounter with Christ. They did not tame the grace of the Gospel; they always had in their heart a healthy apprehension for the Lord, a heartrending desire to bring him to others, as Mary and Joseph did in the temple. We too are called today to make prophetic and courageous choices.

Lastly, through the encounter with Jesus, and through the gift of the vocation to consecrated life, we learn from today's celebration to experience *gratitude*. Thanking, giving thanks: *the Eucharist*. How beautiful it is when we encounter the happy faces of consecrated people, perhaps already advanced in years like Simeon or Anna, content and full of gratitude for their own vocation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Pope Francis tells us that "those who truly encounter Jesus cannot remain the same as before". As you have journeyed in faith, how have you felt yourself changed?
- What are some ways we can continue to personally encounter Jesus?
- Thinking of a time you felt like you encountered the presence of God, what happened and how did you feel?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.