

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction  
The Solemnity of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple  
February 2, 2020

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Today is Candlemas. But that is a nickname for a solemnity that has three major names. Today is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and also called The Meeting (of the Holy Child with Simeon and Anna.) As the names imply, there is a lot going on in this brief episode in the Jerusalem Temple. And as the names also imply, the activity involved four people, (or five, if you include St Joseph with Anna, as we must.) These people show us the four great cornerstones of the Christian character: humility, obedience, faithfulness, and devoted patience. Sooner or later these hallmarks will manifest themselves in any soul responding to the serious call to Christian discipleship. But much, if not most of the time, you and I find ourselves very far indeed from being described in any one, let alone all, of these ways. With us the slogan is “Be patient, God is not through with me yet.” If we skip over the lessons of today’s observance, we do it to our own peril.

First there is the *obedience* of the Holy Family to two laws of religion. One law applied to the mother (the purification after childbirth) and the other to the first-born son (his being presented and ransomed, or bought back, in the Temple). So forty days after Christmas the Holy Family trekked back to Jerusalem to fulfill the obligations of the ancient law. Except that the Holy Family, of all families, was technically *exempt*! Blessed Jesus did not *need* to be presented to the Lord or redeemed with a sacrifice. He *is* the Lord and He *is* the sacrifice. His blessed mother, the only one ever declared “full of grace”, did not *need* ritual purification. Purification was needed after normal childbirth. But Mary had given birth to the Word of God. The Holy Family is our model of *humility*.

Then there is Simeon, a sign of *faithfulness* rewarded. Over the years his heart must have ached that there was still no sign of the repentance in the people and their return to God which would usher in salvation. With no end in sight to Israel’s spiritual and political troubles, Simeon could not hope to see the day of redemption. Yet here he was at his post in the Temple, faithfully fulfilling his duty as he had done a thousand times. But on this day, the Hope of the World was

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suddenly placed in his arms! And Simeon's song of praise, the *Nunc dimittis*, tells us he understood the significance of it all. His faithfulness was not in vain.

The last figures are in the background of the story: Anna and St Joseph. Both are used to that place. In the Christmas crèche you often have to look for Joseph among the figures of the shepherds or kings. And Anna is not always present in the paintings, statues, and stained glass windows portraying Candlemas. This is a reminder there is place in the background of the story of Jesus Christ. Being *in* the story is crucial. But whether the part is prominent or not is less so, and must be left to the Lord. There is the quality of *patience*. Anna, like Joseph, is quiet and unobtrusive, but faithful and devoted.

It is a tall order for you and me to emulate the Holy Family. But Simeon and Anna show us the way of the saints: faithfulness and patience in the face of discouragement and disappointment. This has always been the very backbone of the Church's life, standing against Imperial Rome in the Judaea of the Candlemas saints, against the invasions of Islam in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, and Central Europe, against Hitler and Stalin in the last century, and against the atrocities and perversions of abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender reassignment in our own day. In a world that measures success in terms of doing something, sometimes even diabolical, Christians realize they serve who stand and wait, not idly by any means, but by being faithful at their posts of Christian discipleship. Our job description sometimes requires frenetic activity, energy, excitement, and danger, but it never misses the constant ingredients of humility, obedience, faithfulness, and devoted patience.