

Holy Family B - December 2023

Don't humiliate them!

As a student, Daniel Webster (US Senator, noted 19th century American political orator) was particularly marked for being untidy. Finally, the teacher, in exasperation, told him that if he appeared again with such dirty hands she would thrash him. He did appear in the same condition. "Daniel", she said, "hold out your hand." Daniel spat on his palm, with an intention to clean it, rubbed it on his trousers and held it out. The teacher surveyed it in disgust. "Daniel", she said, "if you can find me another hand in this school that is dirtier than that, I will let you off." Daniel promptly held out his other hand! -- Many children with an eccentric trait blossom into geniuses. The teachers and parents should not underestimate them or humiliate them. (G. Francis Xavier in *The World's Best Inspiring Stories*).

The Light That Brings Discomfort

In 1992 a lighthouse was built in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. This is one of the poorest areas in the world. The lighthouse was constructed to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus. 150,000 people were evicted from their homes in a shantytown to make room for it. The intensity of its light means that electricity is rationed throughout much of the city. The light that brings security for some brings discomfort for others.

Jesus is the light that brings revelation and security but also discomfort and suffering for himself and for others. This is the second point that Simeon makes about this Messiah that is different to the expectations of his day.

Waiting

Jesuit priest William Lynch has observed that there are two kinds of waiting. One kind waits because there is nothing else to do. The other is a waiting energized by hope. The decision to engage in this hopeful kind of waiting, he says, "is one of the great human acts. It includes, surely, the acceptance of the darkness, sometimes in defiance. It includes the enlarging of one's perspective beyond the present moment... It simply chooses to wait, and in so doing gives the future the only chance it has to emerge."

The Coming of Christ Was to Ordinary People!

I have an embarrassing confession to make. I realized only a few days ago what Luke is trying to do in this text. For years I had read it and made the unwarranted assumption that old Simeon was a priest. Anna is described as a prophetess so I assumed Simeon a priest -- good balance and symmetry. But something about the text kept nagging me. And then I realized what it was. Simeon was not a priest at

all. He was a simple old man -- a layman -- an ordinary person. And Anna was not an official prophetess. She was merely a devout old woman who came to the temple a lot. Luke was only underlining a point he had begun to make by telling about the shepherds who were called from their fields and flocks to worship Christ: The coming of Christ was to simple folk! Luke, did you notice, doesn't even tell the story of the wise men; that's Matthew. Luke's whole concern, in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, is to emphasize one thing: Christianity is based on the faith of ordinary folk.

Come to think of it, that's what Luke's whole Gospel is about. It's what the book of Acts is about. Luke wrote the book of Acts. It wasn't the priest and Pharisees who received the Kingdom of God, it was the laypeople, the untutored, the untrained, the unsophisticated. It was simple fishermen like James and John and Peter. It was unimportant public officials like Matthew. It was women like Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene. Christianity my friends, has never been a religion of Priest and theologians, minister's and teachers; from the very beginning it has been a religion of devout men and women with no claim whatsoever to professional expertise about their faith. This is important to remember. God never intended the church to be an organization of ministers. What he did intend it to be is an organization of laypersons, all "righteous and devout" like old Simeon, all devoted to fasting and prayer like old Anna, and all ready, in simple faith, to receive his Kingdom and rejoice in it. Ministers, in Christianity, are expendable; good, simple folk are not!

(by James W. Cox from *The Minister's Manual* 1995, New York: Harper, 1994, p. 275.)

Mary's Suffering

There are two well-known pictures, each with the same title, *The Shadow of the Cross*. One by Holeman Hunt depicts the interior of a carpenter's shop, with Joseph and the Boy Jesus at work. Mary is also present. The Boy Jesus pauses in his work, and as he stretches himself the shadow of the cross is formed on the wall. The other picture is a popular engraving which depicts the Infant Jesus running with outstretched arms to his mother, the shadow of the cross being cast on the ground by his form as he runs. Both pictures are fanciful in form, but their underlying message is true. If we read the Gospels just as they stand, it is clear that the death of Jesus Christ was really in view almost from the outset of his earthly appearance. At first sight there seems little in them about his death, but as we look deeper, we see more. It was part of the divine purpose and plan for him from the first, and very early we have a hint of the cross in the words of the aged Simeon to the mother of our Lord: "A sword shall pierce through thine own heart also."

(by James W. Cox from *The Minister's Manual* 1985, New York: Harper, 1984, p. 70)