

In our Gospel today, we have the two figures of Simeon and Anna who had been faithfully awaiting the coming of the Lord, and they readily welcomed the Holy Family as they formally presented Jesus in the temple according to Jewish custom. Because Simeon and Anna remained faithful over the course of many years, they could make such wonderful pronouncements about the Messiah and could receive the peace that had been promised to them. Anna and Simeon are great examples of faith, but unlike them we know that we have not always been the most faithful and observant people over the course of our lives. Our first reading can actually fill us with a little bit of dread when we hear the messenger Malachi declare, “the Lord is coming but who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?” God certainly comes with mercy and promises us a future together, but when we look at the resurrected Jesus, sometimes all we can see are the nail marks that remain in his hands and feet and his pierced side. Although we have been forgiven, in many ways we are still stuck with the consequences of our sins, we are still stuck with our history of having hurt or having been hurt, something the Church calls the “temporal punishments” due to sin. Because of sin, we may feel that we lost a sense of innocence, or we may still feel guilty about something we’ve done, or we doubt ourselves or our future together; we may want to change but now find ourselves trapped in an overwhelming environment or a cycle of addiction. Malachi speaks of having to be purified so that when the Lord comes, we will meet him not with dread in our hearts, not with regret, not with mourning over past hurts, but with eagerness and peace, like Simeon and Anna.

What can we do to purify ourselves and make things right between the Lord and us (2x)? To answer that question, I want to talk about Penances, Indulgences, and Purgatory. I know it’s unusual to talk about these things, but I think our readings today centering on purification lend themselves to learning about these long-held teachings of the Church. I want us to see that Penances, Indulgences, and Purgatory are really pastoral responses by the Church to our natural longing to make things right. Let’s say, for example, we hit a baseball through the neighbor’s window. Now, the neighbor is incredibly understanding and a godly person and forgives us. After all, we live next to each other and have to make things work – it’s not as if either of us is moving away because of this incident. But now, every time I look next door, I see the broken window and I am reminded of the hurt I’ve caused. We are not able to fix or replace the window ourselves, but we can work out some arrangement that is acceptable to the neighbor, maybe even paying for a new window. This is what a penance is – an effort on our part to satisfy what has been broken in a relationship. As part of the sacrament of Reconciliation, we often work out a penance with the priest as a symbolic effort to make amends in our relationship with God. Indeed, forgiveness has been granted and the future of the relationship is no longer in question; but now we must take steps by our penances to make that future a reality. So penances are purifying actions on our part because they help us overcome past hurts and help us make things right. Indulgences achieve the same things as penances but are a proactive initiative on our part to build up, as my dad would say, “Brownie Points.” They can also be applied to other people as a sort of favor to that relationship. Back to our example, little Jimmy broke the neighbor’s window playing baseball, but being only five, he had no real idea what he was doing and has no way of paying the neighbor back himself. But because Mom and Dad are on good terms with the neighbor and have helped him out many times before, they are able to smooth things over. This incident is insignificant by comparison as they’ve since done enough by the neighbor to keep things right between them. They’ve gained an indulgence for their son, a favor on their son’s behalf, instead of him having to do his own penance. So, in their own proactive way, Indulgences are purifying actions too, in that they help us meet each other in peace instead of fear. We all could use some brownie points.

What happens if we pass away, but still are feeling those temporal punishments due to sin? We love God and have embraced God's merciful invitation to join him in heaven, but perhaps we still have feel ashamed about some things that happened during our time on earth. Between heaven and earth, purification is still possible in Purgatory. Perhaps, the most popular image associated with Purgatory is that of a train station. Already, the person has the ticket to heaven in their hands, but while waiting for said train to come, can allow time to heal their hurting hearts. Accordingly, praying for the souls in Purgatory was thought to lessen their waiting time. Unfortunately, this mentality fostered the idea that someone could simply buy enough indulgences to go right into heaven but we've since fixed this abuse. A good biblical image for Purgatory is like a refiner's fire that burns away impurities. Such imagery is used in our reading from Malachi today. Think of holding needle over a flame to sterilize it for medical use to allow it to pass safely into someone's skin; just so Purgatory is something that purifies us for passing safely into heaven. A new analogy, my favorite analogy is a true story about a husband and wife who were about to celebrate their 50th anniversary, which was coming up next Friday. Well, the husband made plans to surprise his wife with flowers and go out to one of their favorite restaurants. However, they were also in a bowling league together and the league manager, ran into a scheduling conflict. He called the house, asking if they could make it on Friday. The wife who answered the phone, asked her husband inquisitively, "I don't know, is there anything happening on Friday, dear?" Not knowing whom she was talking to and not wanting to spoil the surprise, he didn't let on anything of the plans to go out and celebrate. So his wife scheduled them to go out bowling on their anniversary and hung up the phone. Upon hearing his wife make these plans, he was a little disappointed but went along with it and the two went out bowling that Friday evening. As they were waiting their turn at the lanes, the husband fessed up to his wife that he had made surprise plans to go out for dinner. Realizing that he didn't forget their anniversary, she responded to his confession with incredible understanding over the mix-up and had compassion upon her husband's predicament. After all, she thought, the most important thing was that they were together for their anniversary and were doing something they both enjoyed. They then made plans to go out for dinner the following week and all was forgiven. Except that the husband still felt like he had let his wife down. How could he make it up to her, he wondered? So, for the next week, he took it upon himself to clean the house, do the laundry, and wash all the dishes – things that his wife usually had done. He did these things, these little penances, not because she asked, but because he wanted to prove to her, and perhaps more importantly to himself, that in spite of his weaknesses and mistakes, he truly loved her, and he wanted to demonstrate that in a tangible way. That week helped him to move past his guilt – that temporal punishment due to sin – so that when they went out to the restaurant, he could focus on the dinner they were having together and not the one they were supposed to have. Purgatory functions the same way; it's granted to us so that when it is time to go and see God face to face, there is absolutely nothing holding us back and we can contemplate God in all his glory.

There you have it. A few imaginative analogies meant to help us understand the opportunities God gives us to make things right between us and so remove those temporal effects due to sin: We need some time for the heart to heal. We have some impurity that needs to be burned away by fire. We need to do something to make it better. Until we are in heaven, we undertake our penances and indulgences on earth and for those in purgatory so that we can make things right. Today is the feast of the Presentation and as we are presented to the Lord ourselves, let us be about the work of purification, so that when we go to meet our Lord face to face, there will be nothing, absolutely nothing holding us back - that we may go forth to receive the full peace and splendor of God.

Readings: <http://usccb.org/bible/readings/020220.cfm>

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

Lectionary: 524

Reading 1 [MAL 3:1-4](#)

Thus says the Lord GOD:

Lo, I am sending my messenger

to prepare the way before me;

And suddenly there will come to the temple

the LORD whom you seek,

And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire.

Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

But who will endure the day of his coming?

And who can stand when he appears?

For he is like the refiner's fire,

or like the fuller's lye.

He will sit refining and purifying silver,

and he will purify the sons of Levi,

Refining them like gold or like silver

that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD.

Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem

will please the LORD,

as in the days of old, as in years gone by.

Responsorial Psalm [24:7, 8, 9, 10](#)

R. (8) **Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!**

Lift up, O gates, your lintels;

reach up, you ancient portals,

that the king of glory may come in!

R. **Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!**

Who is this king of glory?

The LORD, strong and mighty,

the LORD, mighty in battle.

R. **Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!**

Lift up, O gates, your lintels;

reach up, you ancient portals,

that the king of glory may come in!

R. **Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!**

Who is this king of glory?

The LORD of hosts; he is the king of glory.

R. **Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!**

Reading 2 [HEB 2:14-18](#)

Since the children share in blood and flesh,

Jesus likewise shared in them,

that through death he might destroy the one

who has the power of death, that is, the Devil,

and free those who through fear of death

had been subject to slavery all their life.

Surely he did not help angels

but rather the descendants of Abraham;

therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters

in every way,

that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God

to expiate the sins of the people.

Because he himself was tested through what he suffered,

he is able to help those who are being tested.

Alleluia [LK 2:32](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

A light of revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel **LK 2:22-40 OR 2:22-32**

When the days were completed for their purification
according to the law of Moses,
Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem
to present him to the Lord,
just as it is written in the law of the Lord,
Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,
and to offer the sacrifice of
a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,
in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.
This man was righteous and devout,
awaiting the consolation of Israel,
and the Holy Spirit was upon him.
It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit
that he should not see death
before he had seen the Christ of the Lord.
He came in the Spirit into the temple;
and when the parents brought in the child Jesus
to perform the custom of the law in regard to him,
he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

“Now, Master, you may let your servant go
in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel.”

The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him;
and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,
“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 thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”
There was also a prophetess, Anna,
the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.
She was advanced in years,
having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage,
and then as a widow until she was eighty-four.
She never left the temple,
but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.
And coming forward at that very time,
she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child
to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions
of the law of the Lord,
they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.
The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom;
and the favor of God was upon him.

or

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