

The Presentation
Mal. 3:1-4; Heb. 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

Grandeur and Intimacy*

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One of Rembrandt's favorite subjects for his paintings was the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The great Dutch master drew or sketched several versions of this biblical story during his life. In fact, the Presentation was the subject of Rembrandt's very last painting, which remained unfinished on his easel at the time of his death at age 63.

A much earlier version of the Presentation, painted when Rembrandt was a young man in his 20s, is striking for its grandeur. Everything about that painting is huge. The Temple is huge, with numerous people sitting on its great steps. Simeon, whose beautiful words we hear in today's Gospel, is wearing grand, flowing vestments. And there is a brilliant ray of light that shines on to the Christ Child. It reminds me of Act I of Zeffirelli's lavish production of *Tosca* at the Metropolitan Opera.

This early version of the Presentation contrasts sharply with Rembrandt's final painting. His deathbed version of the Presentation is striking for its intimacy. It is a close up of Simeon holding the baby Jesus, and the two of them take up almost the entire painting. The lighting in the painting is soft and dim, and Simeon's eyes are looking down at Jesus with a quiet sense of wonder and peace.

Grandeur and intimacy. These two contrasting yet complementary themes are a fitting way of thinking about the Presentation, which is the liturgical feast that we celebrate today. According to the law of Moses, a firstborn son must be presented in the Temple on the 40th day following his birth, and a sacrifice of a lamb – or a pair of turtledoves or pigeons in the case of those who were less wealthy – must be made to God. And so today we also commemorate the Presentation on the 40th day after Christmas. (Well, technically it's been 38 days, but who's counting? It will be 40 days on Tuesday, the actual feast day.)

It was also on the 40th day after childbirth that the mother was considered ritually clean, which is why this feast was also called the "Purification of St. Mary the Virgin" in the Prayer Books from 1549 through 1928. In today's Hebrew Bible reading, we hear the prophet Malachi speak about how God purifies God's people, just as a refiner purifies gold and silver. Nowadays, the notion of ritual uncleanness after childbirth may seem strange and perhaps even a bit offensive. But in ancient times this rule also served a

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practical purpose in that it allowed women to recover at home after childbirth before returning to the wider community.

Anyway, the Presentation of Jesus is an occasion that is both grand and intimate. Grand because this is a pivotal moment in salvation history when the Christ child is presented to the public as the Messiah – not only to the religious establishment of his day, but also to the entire world. He is, as Simeon says, a “light for revelation to the Gentiles.” (And that is why today is also celebrated as Candlemas, the liturgical day of the year when candles – which give out light – are traditionally blessed and distributed in church.)

But Jesus’ Presentation is also an intimate moment. Simeon, a righteous and devout man, has been promised that he will see the Savior before he leaves this world. When he encounters Jesus in the Temple, he responds with some of the most touching words in scripture, the *Nunc Dimittis*, which we hear in today’s gospel reading and is still recited each night at the close of the Compline service:

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.

Simeon takes Jesus in his arms, tenderly looks at the child, and acknowledges that he has now been dismissed in peace by God. This is a deeply intimate and personal moment for Simeon.

Although I have only served at Transfiguration for a year, I’ve observed that Bishop Andrew’s ministry here – like the Presentation itself – has been both grand and intimate. Those of us who were at his fabulous retirement party last night were struck by the large number of people who came and celebrated his wonderful – and dare I say, grand – ministry at Transfiguration over the last decade. Who hasn’t been awed by the high liturgies here with copious smells and bells; the great processions on holy days with lots and lots of lay servers and all three orders of ordained ministry represented; and the beautiful vestments in the finest Anglo-Catholic tradition? And not to mention the magnificent concerts and parish parties in the rectory. Grand indeed.

On the other hand, I have also observed – and been greatly moved by – Bishop Andrew’s intimacy and closeness with God. This often translates into an understated yet fastidious attention to the small things. Whether it’s seeing him sit in the choir stalls before Sunday high mass and quietly rehearsing the collect of the day; or his checking to make sure that the Bible on the lectern is open to the right page; or his precise completion of each line of the service register after every mass or other service, Bishop Andrew has modeled quiet servant leadership in the same way as the righteous, devout, and faithful Simeon.

Bishop Andrew, on the occasion of your canonical retirement, we thank you for your service to Transfiguration, to the Diocese, and to the broader Anglican Communion. Like the Feast of the Presentation itself, your ministry and leadership has been both grand and intimate.

May you be as blessed as Simeon was, as the next chapter of your vocation unfolds here in New York City and around the world. And thank you, most of all, on this Candlemas for revealing God's light to us – a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and a light for glory to God's people.