

Homily 2014Feb02 Candlemas, Jesus College

Being Present: Malachi 3:1-5; Ps 23(24); Lk 2:22-40

One of my brothers in the Society of Jesus once told me that *Our Lady had much better taste than St Ignatius* because she appeared in beautiful countryside places, unlike the Chapel which we were visiting, beside a busy crossroads, called La Storta, on the Via Cassia into Rome, where it bends to give the first view of the Dome of the Vatican. In that Wayside Chapel, Christ carrying his Cross, accompanied by the Father and the Spirit, appeared to St Ignatius Loyola, as he approached the city to ask the Bishop of Rome where and how his companions could best serve the Lord, giving Ignatius assurance that the Companions of Jesus were truly sent by the Father as instruments united to his hand, to continue his mission of Reconciliation, Consolation, and Improvement in Christian Living and Learning.

Crossroads and marketplaces are exactly where Ignatius and the first Jesuits were called to be present so that they could meet the discouraged and confused people to whom they were sent in Rome, India, China and the Americas. For them and for Jesuits today, consolation is found better in the noise and busy-ness of the crossing on the highway than in a quiet and beautiful mountainside, perhaps because consolation is more needed at the Crossing.

Recently I experienced that deep consolation, peace and joy, in a most unlikely place, as I walked along Sackville Street on the way to Manchester Piccadilly Station. I'd spent the weekend visiting the friends and places from my student days, and, in a sense, looking back with fondness over other possible lives I could have chosen for myself. As I neared the station, I had a great sense of confirmation that, wonderful though those other lives would have been, the life that I have chosen is what brings me the greatest joy, because it is for this that I was called into being, this is my vocation, and I was returning to it on the train to the maelstrom ending Michaelmas term.

The Jesuit call is to seek God in all things, because the Way is present as much in the roaring traffic's boom as in the silence of one's room; Truth and Life is present in the wounded as much as in the peaceful and beautiful, leading a well-known Jesuit, who is now Bishop of Rome, recently to describe the Church as a field hospital in the midst of a battle.

Today's feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple brings apparently contradictory scenes into conversation. The Temple was the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant, the throne or footstool of the Lord's invisible presence on earth, imaging the Divine presence in the court of heaven. Yet today we see the visible entrance, of the Lord made human, in the arms of his Mother, who becomes his throne, the Ark of the New Covenant and Seat of Wisdom. God is fully present at the same time in the Temple and throughout Jesus life, the healing and forgiving presence of God to each place and person he visited. The Lord's presentation in the Temple signals the end of the Temple, because its primary role of being the unique dwelling place of the All-Holy One is now shared with every place to which Jesus goes and with every baptised person, because *we were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory*¹.

¹ Eph 1:13-14

Before his death, he left us his abiding presence in the Eucharist, by which those baptised into his body and confirmed in his Spirit, receive his presence, and are together transformed into the Body of God made flesh present with us, and we carry it with us to every place that we go. The Lord is now present in every place because one of the fruits of Christ's Resurrection is that now,

*I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*²

Today, the Risen Christ is present in two billion places, wherever 'justices' one who bears the name of Christian. The Temple is now the whole world as the Bible shows us, in its last-but-one chapter, when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven: 'See, the home* of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,* and God himself will be with them;⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'³ Surprisingly, there is *no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*⁴.

That means Christians are not called to spend all our time in Church being "Holy" in a narrow sense of the word. We are called to process, bearing candles, out from the community or building of the Church, to be sent out of it carrying the *Light of Revelation to the Nations* into the world. Holiness is about being attentive to and sharing the Lord's presence to us and especially to the weak of the world in every moment of every day, so that *acknowledging this with gratitude, we may be able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in everything*⁵, in the words of St Ignatius. He advised Jesuits in studies: "by acquiring learning and ... by increasing fraternal charity, you make yourselves perfect instruments of God's grace and collaborators in the sublime work of leading God's creatures back to Him as to their last end. ... you are serving God's honour and glory in many ways. ... The demands of your life of study do not permit you to devote much time to prayer, yet you can make up for this by desires, since the time you devote to your various exercises is a continuous prayer, seeing that you are engaged in them only for God's service"⁶.

Ignatius invites us all to become aware of God's presence to us and for us in all things, whatever we are doing, always looking for better ways to praise, love and serve the Lord and our neighbour. We still need places of quiet, Chapels and Churches, to help us stop and become aware of the moments and places of God's presence to us, but we will notice then that we can find God present and serve him as much at the Crossroads as on a mountain top or in a beautiful Chapel.

² Gerard Manley Hopkins: As kingfishers catch fire

³ Rev 21:3-4

⁴ Rev 21:22

⁵ St Ignatius Loyola *SpEx* [233]

⁶ St Ignatius Loyola: To the Fathers & Brothers Studying at Coimbra; On Perfection Rome 7 May 1547