

This sermon, Fr. Dcn Stephen delivered on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday to the community of St. Nicholas.

February 5, 2017

Feast of the Presentation of Jesus

Glory to Jesus Christ

+Come Holy Spirit..Our Lady of Fatima... Our Lady of the Eucharist...Our Lady of Pentecost

The Pharisee STOOD and prayed—With himself...

The Publican STOOD FAR OFF and prayed God..Be merciful to me a sinner.

1) I want to briefly mention the Gospel today because of the manifest contrasts between the two men:

The Pharisee, because of his self righteousness, stood very close to the Sanctus Sanctorum—where only the super Jews and Priests could go. No Gentile could go there.

And his prayer was that of a self righteous man-listing all of his good works that a good observer of the Jewish law would do.

And Jesus said: “He prayed with himself-- you could almost translate that as TO himself.

2) The Publican or tax collector presents a different posture---he stands FAR OFF. He was probably not in the Court that super Jews could enter. He more than likely was in the Court of the Gentiles. You couldn't get farther away from the Holy of Holies and still be in the temple building.

His prayer was self effacing. "Have Mercy on me a sinner." This was to become the so called "Jesus Prayer," that is uttered thousands of times a day by contemplative Christians.

3) It is interesting that Jesus used the Publican in this parable in a positive way. Jews hated Publicans. Jesus turns this upside down **by calling Matthew**, a Publican, to be an Apostle, **by calling Zacheus**, a publican (that Fr. Dcn Joeph preached about last Sunday,) calling him down from the sycamore tree to have dinner with him and then in this parable, and **by illustrating** the fact that the only one who knew how to reach the heart of God was not the Pharisee, but the Publican.

I think Jesus liked rankling his audience.

4) The prayer that travels like lightening to the heart of God is a prayer for Mercy. That is a prayer the God always hears.

5) And after reflecting on this Gospel, I stand before you as a man who, like the Publican has asked for and been the beneficiary so much of God's great mercy that I would like to tell you a bit about it...about my life in God's mercy.

6) Today I am celebrating my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Having just returned from a marvelous cruise in the Western Caribbean. And knowing I was preaching today, I had many hours to pray

**and reflect on those 75 years** and pray.... while I sat on my cabin's veranda.

7) And so I composed my top 10 List of Spiritual and Merciful lessons of that I have learned in my journey with Jesus: in my life of growing in the grace and holiness of Almighty God.

8) Many times it has been two steps forward and three steps backward. But the Holy Spirit has never let me lose sight of my goal; of my journey's destination which is eternal union with Jesus in His Mystical Body.

I- The journey began in May 1942 and my Baptism. At the elegant marble baptismal font in old St. Mary's church in Norfolk, my parents and God parents made promises on my behalf that one day I was going to be required to make my own.

After I was baptized, a Sister of Charity who staffed the parochial school, came in and asked my Mother if she could hold me. My mother placed me in her arms.

She carried me to the front of the church and laid me on the Altar of the Blessed Mother. Prayed a moment, returned me to my Mother's arms, smiled and left the Church.

My Mother had just graduated from that parochial school 3 years before. She had never seen that nun before and she never saw her again.

And so, my journey began under Mary's auspices and protection. Mary has always shown me the way. As De

Montfort wrote: Mary is the safest, the surest and the shortest way to Jesus.

Mary's final recorded words in Scripture in John : Do whatever He tells you.

- II- These are questions that God most frequently answers: WHAT, WHERE, HOW and WHEN. He rarely, if ever, answers WHY. The WHY questions require us to Trust Him while on Earth in order to have them answered fully in heaven.

Remember Job? The book spends 37 Chapters asking God "WHY" Finally, in Chapter 38, God replies...But not in answering WHY...but by Asking Job 64 questions for him to answer.

Don't bother asking God WHY. Ask Him HOW... how can I turn this adversity into Your Glory.

Thomas Merton wrote that in this life, the speech of God is "silence."

- III- Outside of the Divine Liturgy, the most important element in our relationship with Jesus is Daily PRAYER.

- IV- Nothing says "I love you" to Jesus better than receiving Him worthily in Holy Communion.

When I was contemplating leaving the Catholic church back in the eighties and becoming a bloody protestant, it was the merciful gift of my Faith in the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist that kept me Catholic.

The Protestants may have a great, practical and powerful knowledge of the Scriptures, but they are

incomplete. They don't have Jesus in His Eucharistic presence.

Remember the Journey to Emmaus? Jesus taught the Scriptures to them SHOWING HOW THE Old Testament pointed to HIM.—and their hearts burned.

BUT—and this is BIG—they didn't really know Jesus through his teaching but ONLY IN THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD...IN THE EUCHARIST.

V- Pray as you ARE. Do not try to Pray as you “Want to be.” I wasted much time and energy trying to engage in “contemplative” wordless prayer. I tried for years. All I can say is that my my prayer time was more nap time. But I was determined.

However, When a priest friend of mine became my spiritual director many years ago, he gave me a Myers-Brigs test. He told me that my mind was too active. I need a variety of prayer resources: rosary, the Scripture, the Liturgy of the Hours, candles, incense. So pray as you are...not as you are NOT.

VI- The Blessed Mother told Faustina that God wishes to see three great virtues in our lives:  
They are HUMILITY, Humility and again Humility. Humility is supported and nourished by Trust and Obedience.

VII- What is the goal of the Spiritual life? A great Russian mystic St. Seraphim of Sarov asked this of his disciples.

“Prayer,” answered one. “Becoming a saint,” said another. “Holiness said a third.” The wise spiritual master, said “No...they are but the fruit of a Spiritual life. Not a goal. The Goal of the “Spritual Life in Christ, he said, is “Acquisition of the Holy Spirit.”

I have found that only a life that is enformed, enflamed and empowered by the Holy Spirit can be considered a life that is fully and authentically Christian.

VIII- Why does God let bad things happen to us? Well we already cited the Scriptures from Hebrews regarding the sufferings of Christ and His learning discipline in what he suffered.

Perhaps you have heard of Joni Eareckson Tada. She has written several books on her sufferings. In 1967, at the age of 18, a diving accident left her a Quadriplegic.

I recently listened to her testimony and it is powerful. She had just become a Christian 3 weeks BEFORE her accident. “hey God,” she said. “This is a great way to repay me for making my commitment to you...” Her sufferings continue to be intense. Her pain relentless.

But she has ministered to thousands over the years. In the interview I heard, a woman asked Joni , “if God is so good, WHY (there is that WHY question) do these bad things happen to his people.”

Joni cited Romans 8 28: “All things work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.”

God doesn't want pain—suffering—adversity for us. But- NOW THIS IS YOUR TAKE AWAY LINE--- “God permits what He hates in order to accomplish WHAT HE LOVES.”

IX- I mentioned recently that many years ago while in the seminary, I had read a book by St John of the Cross entitled the “Secret to Sanctity.” I did not find it in John’s book:

However, over the years I have found that The Secret to Sanctity and becoming a saint is this. It is at once difficult as it is simple: **Prayerful and Trustful surrender to the Providential Will of God. —each and every moment of our life.**

Read John Chapters 4,5,6. Jesus says the same thing three times. “I have not come to do my will, but the will of Him who sent me. If it was good enough for Jesus, what about us????

X- At the end of his short life, and having almost completed his great work the Summa Theologiae, St. Thomas Aquinas was meditating in front of the Blessed Sacrament. He would actually open the tabernacle door and stick his head in to Hear the Lord.

On this day, Jesus appeared and said to him: “Thomas—you have written well of me. What can I give you in return?” Thomas responded in 7 words: “non nisi te, Domine, non nisi te.” Nothing but you, Lord, nothing but you.

And I can say in all truth, standing here before the Blessed Sacrament, If Jesus appeared to me and asked me what He could give me in return for my humble

service, I would echo the words of Thomas: Non nisi te,  
Domine, non nisi te.

My friends, in the last analysis, it is Jesus Christ, and our  
relationship with Him that is the only thing that matters.

As Psalm 73 says:

For whatever else in Heaven do I have but you O Lord

For apart from you..there is nothing I desire

My heart and my soul both sing for joy,

For you are my only possession.

Glory to Jesus Christ.