

I used to think one of the best things about having clergy colleagues was that I didn't have to preach every week. I appreciate not having a weekly preaching deadline, which gives me a little additional time to focus on other essential aspects of parish ministry on those weeks when I'm not scheduled to be in the pulpit.

What's even better about having clergy colleagues, however, is that I get to hear them preach and learn from them. I get to see Jesus through their eyes. I get to hear how they view the world and our place in it, and I get to learn what they've discerned about the particular needs and concerns of the parish community to which we both minister. Such is the richness of a place like this, where I get to hear on a regular basis from my colleague, Fr. James Shire.

His past two Epiphanytide sermons have been particularly rich devotional and catechetical experiences for me personally. In them, he has been developing the implications of what it means to be in a parish where we are seen, we are known, and we are loved. It's one thing to affirm that of course God sees us, knows us, and loves us. But somehow it's even more powerful to realize that in our fellow parishioners, we have an opportunity to sense for ourselves that we are seen, known, and loved when we open ourselves in vulnerability in community. And we are challenged thereby to see, know, and love each other for who we really are in the here and now, and to dare to hope that God will take that vision, knowledge, and love into God's redemptive and transformative purposes in Christ, so that we become even more whom God has created us to be: more visible and yet transparent, more intelligible and yet mysterious, loved not conditionally, but unconditionally.

The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, also known as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, nicknamed Candlemas from the tradition attached to the beginning of this Mass, is about being seen, known, and loved. Mary and Joseph present the infant Jesus in the Temple, where he is seen by Simeon and Anna. He is recognized and known for who he is. And he is loved for what his presence among in the Temple promises for the future.

And as if that weren't enough, Mary is also seen, known, and loved. Mary is not only the joyful mother of a newborn, but Simeon also foresees the sorrows in store for her as one whose heart will be pierced by a sword. Simeon prophetically sees who Mary is and what she will have to suffer, and in speaking this truth, gives her the gift of God's empathy, a recognition that what she is doing as a mother is *hard*, and it won't get any easier, but her motherhood, like motherhood in general, comes with the promise of God's presence, come what may.

Here, Fr. Shire's words from a few weeks ago bear repeating:

“What draws people to Christ, what draws people to his community is the emotional and indeed spiritual recognition of ‘I see you; I know you; and I love you.’ And it is in that space of community where the real miracles of mercy, forgiveness, and transformation can happen.”

At Candlemas, we celebrate the fact that Simeon and Anna are the first to see, know, and love Jesus as the Messiah. In this regard, they are amongst the first to be invited into a community where they are seen, known, and loved, as well.

Many of us secretly believe that we will not be loved if people see us for who we really are, or know us as we know ourselves. They would be too scandalized, or repulsed, or weirded out by the devices and desires of our hearts. Or they would be offended by our political opinions, so we keep them to ourselves. We constantly edit who we are when we are around other people. To a certain extent, this is not a bad thing, if what we are doing is setting healthy boundaries. But each and every one of us yearns, deep down inside, to be seen.

The day drinker who hides his bottles from his spouse, the bishop whose internet searches are kept incognito, we hide these things from others and don't even want to admit them to ourselves. We also can hide our virtues: the working mother who advocates for her autistic child, the rich man who prefers the soup kitchen to the board room. To each of these people, the Christ who was presented in the Temple and is seen by Simeon and Anna says to them: I see you. I see you drinking alone. I see you looking for love in all the wrong places. I see how much effort you are putting into being a devoted parent. I see your love for the poor even if everyone else only likes you for your money.

And the one who sees you knows what it's like. As we heard from Hebrews this evening, because Jesus himself "was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Jesus is not some stained glass figure who doesn't understand what it's like to want to numb the pain, to find comfort, to advocate for justice, to stand in solidarity with the poor. He knows what you are going through and he understands.

And because he knows and understands you for who you are, his love is real. He is not fooled by the false selves that we present to the world, the one who has everything together, the one whose prayer life is so admirable, the one whose parenting is carefree, the one whose power and prestige are coveted.

The one who is seen, known, and loved by Simeon and Anna in the Temple in Jerusalem wants to see, know, and love us in this church in Toronto. And it's our job to let God work through us to make this church a safe place where we may be seen, known, and loved by each other. Whatever draws us here, whether it's music, or outreach, what keeps us coming back is the promise of an authentic community that knows that in this place, we can be who we are to each other so that Christ Jesus can take who we are and transform us into his likeness, the likeness of one who sees, knows, and loves ourselves, our souls and bodies, and our neighbours as ourselves.