



My dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

This Sunday represents an interesting meeting place liturgically, because this Sunday, February 1st is both the Forefeast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, as well as the beginning of the *Triodion*.

So, in one sense, we are looking back to Our Lord's Nativity, because the Presentation (40 Days after Christmas, February 2nd) in many ways concludes that chapter of the story. After the quiet majesty of His Birth & Adoration, followed by His Circumcision & Naming, now, His mother, Mary, and His guardian, Joseph, further fulfill the Law, bringing Him for dedication to the Temple. They are met by the Prophet Simeon, who spent many years studying the Messianic prophecies, praying piously to God that he be allowed to remain alive until He has seen the Christ. Therefore, Simeon is overcome with emotion, taking the Child in his arms and saying, "*Lord, now let Your servant go in peace according to Your promise, because my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory to your people Israel*" (Luke 2:29-32).

How strange, in our rational minds, to be at once preparing ourselves for the commemoration of the Christ Child held in Simeon's arms, but also, at the same time recalling the Lenten spirit of our Lord's Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The Pharisee, respected in the eyes of men, justifies himself before God, while insulting the tax collector; while the tax collector does not even dare to look at heaven, only weeping as he prays, "*God, be merciful to me a sinner!*" (Luke 18:13) However, let us look closer at the virtues these two events share.

Looking past the comforting image of Simeon holding a young Christ, and the beautiful prayer we use to conclude Vespers, remember how Simeon turns to Mary, continuing to prophesy: "*Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed*" (Luke 2:34-35). Here, is the point of connection between these commemorations: our Lord humbled Himself to take on our flesh, and to be held in the arms of one of His own Priests. Such humility is unfortunately, not common, as we can see from the "prayers" of the Pharisee. More to the point, Christ's insistence on our need to assume the same kind of self-denying humility as the Publican is still treated as a kind of threat: it reveals the thoughts of many hearts, today, as it did in Israel, especially among those who do not wish to fall from earthly power.

May we use the commemoration of the Forefeast of the Presentation & the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee to soften our hearts: imitating the tax collector's humility, sincerely repenting of our own faults, and trying to forgive our brothers and sisters. Only then will we progress in our journey to share the same innocent and humble spirit, shown by our Lord, both as a babe in Simeon's arms and as the God-Man on the Cross.

+SEVASTIANOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta