

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've never subscribed to “People” magazine, but I have read an occasional article in an issue, which makes me like a whole lot of us. “People” magazine began in 1974 and has an adult readership of over forty million, making it the largest selling magazine in America.

“People” magazine has survived and thrived for 40 years because Americans love celebrities. Many of us want to know all about people who make the news, from movie stars to sports legends to the person next door who has done amazing things.

For every celebrity, of course, there are thousands of people with wonderful talents, amazing lives, and great gifts to share whom most of us seldom notice. They are the people who get things done and whom we count on every day to keep life moving.

They are teachers and nurses, firefighters and police officers, garbage collectors and doctors, parking valets and restaurant servers, stockbrokers and bankers, pastors and priests, moms and dads and so many more.

Our scripture today lifts up several people who had little in the way of “celebrity status” but who had a role in Jesus’ story. Their connection with Jesus and their service to him quietly changed their lives. We can learn much from them.

Admittedly, Mary (especially) and Joseph probably have “star power” today. Millions of people revere them as the earthly parents of Jesus Christ. We celebrate them every year with the retelling of the events surrounding the first Christmas. Mary has a special place in the hearts of so many as they remember her quiet faith and obedience when God called her to be the mother of the Savior of the world.

In our Gospel for today, Luke records that “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ... and they offered a sacrifice”

It was a simple act duplicated by loving parents for generations. It's a simple act but a profound statement of faith by Mary and Joseph. In effect, they were setting the tone and the agenda for the rest of their lives. In presenting Jesus “to the Lord,” they were affirming their commitment to live lives that would help Jesus grow to fulfill his calling.

While we know little about Jesus’ upbringing, we do know that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Egypt to save his life from the murderous hand of Herod. We also know that “every year [Jesus’] parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover ...,” (Luke 2:41) and that when he was 12, they found him sitting in the temple listening to and asking questions of the teachers.

So Mary and Joseph raised Jesus in a way that made God an everyday part of life. They were devoted to God and to their son.

Many parents can say they have done the same thing. But many parents cannot. Even when they have brought their child to the church for dedication or baptism, they see it as simply something to be done rather than a wholehearted commitment to raise the child in a home where God is worshiped and obeyed.

The wonderful thing is that when children are raised in a home where God is honored and worshiped, not only is the child blessed and guided by God, but the whole family is blessed and changed for the better.

So parents should of course teach their children table manners and the rules of good conduct, but what a great blessing it is for all involved when parents teach their children the attributes of God, and things like how to pray, and how to study the Bible.

Certainly Mary and Joseph took time to teach Jesus the big stuff. When Jesus was brought to the temple, the Holy Spirit led an old man to see him. Simeon was “righteous and devout” and in tune with the Spirit. God had revealed to him that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.”

When he took Jesus in his arms, he praised God. His words of praise in verses 29-32 are known as the Nunc Dimittis (named for its opening words in the Latin version):

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.

Several important things come to light in this scene. First, God is in control because the Spirit promised Simeon he would not die prior to seeing the Messiah.

Second, Jesus brings joy! To see Jesus is to see salvation. They are inseparable. There is joy, in fact, even in the face of death, when one has seen the source of life.

Third, Simeon had the great opportunity to announce God’s work through Jesus as being for all people: a light to the Gentiles and glory for Israel. Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about Jesus. Given everything they had already experienced in the last year, it’s significant that anything could amaze them — but Simeon’s words did just that.

Fourth, following Jesus will not always be easy. Simeon told Mary and Joseph, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel.” While Jesus came as Savior, he would not unify the nation. Indeed, many would oppose him and, as a result, a sword would pierce Mary’s own soul too. Later, of course, Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Simeon was a simple man of faith and obedience whose life was changed forever by meeting Jesus.

In today’s Gospel, Anna is the person we know the least. We know her lineage (daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher). We know that after only seven years of marriage, her husband died and she lived as a widow till the age of 84.

She was a faithful prophet who “never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” On the day Jesus was brought to the temple, she praised God and spoke about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

Think of her dedication to God! Day after day after year after year — she worshiped and trusted and praised God. And one day she saw the Savior! What if she had grown weary and decided to go home and forget about it? “What are the chances anything will happen today?” she could have said. But she was faithful and obedient, and Jesus forever changed her life.

This is now the fourth day of Christmas. Likely, most or even all of the gifts have been opened. Parties have come and gone. The credit card bills are still a few days or weeks away. It’s easy to simply settle down and say, “Whew, I’m glad that’s over for another year.” But that would be a mistake.

Jesus still changes lives today. Maybe, like Mary and Joseph, you’re unsure of the future. They could not imagine all that would happen over the next few decades as their child grew up. But their lives were forever changed, and because they were faithful, the world was forever changed through their son and our Savior.

Maybe you know that there are more years behind you than ahead of you. Some people get so wrapped up in the past they forget about the future. But not Simeon! Knowing he was closer to death than many, still he looked ahead and found hope and life in Jesus.

Maybe, like Anna, life has not dealt you the best hand. Living the majority of her adult life as a widow could have easily left her bitter. But it didn't! She worshiped God day after day after day. And her faithfulness and obedience were rewarded as she saw Jesus.

Maybe your life is not what you thought it would be. Remember these ordinary people who put their faith in Jesus and their lives were forever changed.

Maybe you will never make it to People magazine. But far more important than people knowing you as a celebrity is you knowing Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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