

**Not for Nothing The Presentation of the Lord** Sunday, **February 2, 2014** 9:00 AM  
Mal 3:1-4; **Heb 2:14-18; Lk 2: 22-40** (The death of Jesus and his way of accepting death is emancipation for all human beings from bondage.)

This feast of the **Presentation of Our Lord is a midway point between** the festivities of **Christmas and** the celebration of his birth and the coming sobriety of Lent and the celebration of **Christ's passion and death**. The point of the liturgy is that both are good news. The birth of Jesus is good news and **the passion and death of Jesus is also good news because it was purposeful and life-giving**. But as Simeon remarks to Jesus' parents, the life of Jesus is going to produce a great deal of upheaval and heartache, even for those who love God. Again, the good news is that **upheaval and heartache are endurable precisely because God is gifting us with himself**. In Jesus eternal life is visible, tangible, receivable and giving itself to us.

It is this mystery that the Letter to the Hebrews, our second reading today, is reflecting. Jesus had a full share in all the trials that we have, but through his death he has robbed the prince of death of his power and freed all those who through the fear of death have been slaves their whole life long. Now that's quite a thought. What does it mean? It is very central to the Christian gospel that **the death of Jesus brings freedom**—from what? What does it mean, and how does the death of Jesus bring it about? That's the question. Bondage, the word here, can be any kind of compulsion, where we act in a way we don't really want to act, but can't avoid. So bondage includes every kind of **slavery and addiction, whether physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual**. All of this is included in the Letter to the Hebrews: bondage is a spiritual impotence rooted **in the fear of death**. So **through the fear of death**, which is natural for people, probably animals as well, **the devil keeps people unfree, bound up, compulsive**.

This is not easy to think about, but there's a movie I just saw that helps us think about it called *Twelve Years a Slave*, a true story of a free black man named Solomon Northrup who was kidnapped in Washington DC—he was a citizen of New York—was kidnapped on a trip into Washington DC, which was in the South if you remember, and transported to Louisiana and sold as a slave. In this film what is vividly portrayed is the fact that **slavery existed only because of fear**. The slaves discuss this themselves; **the fear of death or of torture paralyzed the slaves and rendered them submissive**. The few individuals who stood up were simply killed. The author to the Hebrews is carrying this observation further. **The fear of death paralyzes human beings preventing all of us from being free**. In the movie it is very clear if the slaves had preferred death to shackles, there would have been no slavery, but the desire for life is the other side of the coin. Fear of death/desire for life—that is also very powerful and it is **that combination fear of death/love of life that keeps people trapped in evil: negative situations, addictions, and relations that they really need to be freed from**.

**Jesus' life is about this freedom and it calls us into action rooted in faith, providing cooperation with God's grace and commitment to God's will**. Evil, violence, and injustice hold a great sway over many people in our world. The point that the Letter to the Hebrews is trying to make is that **the masters of force**, the masters of this world, the rulers of this age, so to speak, **are as much in bondage as their victims**, trapped in a life that is much too

small. God wants something much more for us. **God is offering us transcendence, eternal life, the peace the world cannot give.** Life is richer, wider, and fuller than our poor experience suggests. And yet something in us knows that. Something in the slaves knew that too.

In *Twelve Years a Slave* the hero did not run or fight, not really because he was a coward; that's not why, but rather out of hope. Knowing that he was legally free, he nurtured the hope that someday he could contact his family and his friends up north who would procure his freedom. **The author of Hebrews wants us to nurture the hope that if we get into contact with God's grace, we then can be freed from earthly prisons of all kinds:** addictions, compulsions, relations, and live liberated the life of the kingdom, a citizen of heaven even while on earth. Unlike his fellow captives, Solomon Northrup knows of his legal rights and not only survives, but maintains his dignity.

Just about ten years after Solomon Northrup was liberated, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves in the United States. However, a war had to be fought in order to enforce that proclamation. In a similar way, **the death of Jesus and his way of accepting death is emancipation for all human beings from bondage,** from every kind of compulsion and prison: emotional, psychological, spiritual, physical. **But spiritual warfare is still needed to enforce it, and that's where we are today.** Like Solomon Northrup we can hope for freedom, but unlike him **we can know the actual outcome of the battle.** That is what faith informs us of. **The resurrection of Jesus is God's affirmation of Jesus' life,** his way of living, his teachings about God. The superiority of good over evil, the superiority of love over hate—all of this shines through in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. **It also reveals to us the outcome of human history,** not in the narrow, nationalistic way we are taught in school, but in the broader, universal sense. **Equipped with this truth we can be free. Evil will still attack, but it cannot prevail.** Our struggles are “not for nothing,” as the Irish like to say—“not for nothing.” They are our contributions to the emancipation of all God's children from darkness. And, yes, we all have a role to play in this.