

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

2 February 2012.

Mass with Religious.

Westminster Cathedral

Homily of Most Rev Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster

Today, as we celebrate this Feast, the Scripture Readings focus our minds on the 'coming of the Lord into the Temple'.

And we are that temple.

Today we do well to recall the definitive moment of that coming, the day of our Religious Profession, when we opened the doors of our lives to His coming. On that day those doors were opened in a public and solemn manner as we welcomed Him as the first love and Lord of our lives.

I wish to congratulate all of you who today celebrate the anniversary of your Profession. I congratulate, with particular warmth, those who are celebrating notable jubilees of that Profession. This moment will be marked more publicly in the Hall after Mass.

Let me begin with the first reading from the Prophet Malachi and with the key words:

'The Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter his temple.'

This entry of the Lord into the Temple marks a new beginning.

No longer is God to be sought on a mountain, in the remotest places. No longer is God to be found in a tent of meeting; no longer in the consequences of battle. But now God is in our midst with permanence and continuity.

The prophet also spells out for us the consequences of that permanent and continuous presence of the Lord within our temple. He uses two verbs to describe those consequences: the verbs 'to purify' and 'to refine'. And he uses them three times in the few lines of the reading. He is making an important point. When we welcome the Lord into our temple we must not expect to remain unchanged.

Religious life teaches us that. In religious life we can expect, in a popular phrase, to have the corners knocked off us. In religious life we cannot be self-directing. Now we are subject to the Lord, to the One we have welcomed in. We are subject to Him in the voice of the Church, in the voice of our Religious Congregation and in the voice of the poor and those whom our charism urges us to serve. This is a demanding pathway of life. But it is rewarding for we are being refined so as to be like gold in His eyes.

The Psalm of our Mass today expresses a similar thought:

'Oh gates, lift up your heads,

Grow higher ancient doors' It is an effort to permit the Lord to enter. It goes against so much of the grain of our human habits. We tend to live with our heads down, burdened with shame. The ancient doors of human nature are often closed in self-defence against the 'arrows of outrageous fortune' and all the unexpected hurts of life.

Today we lift up again our heads so that we may feel on our faces the light of Christ's presence.

We open our doors – ancient not because of our years but because they bear the weight of our fallen humanity, of Adam's sin – to receive Him.

And the Gospel makes clear that the coming of the Lord into his Temple is fulfilled in the entrance of Jesus. In Him the great promise is fulfilled.

The voices of the Temple, the voices of the old dispensation, bear witness to this: Anna and Simeon. They are good, holy and devout people, and they raise their voices in greeting.

Our voices blend with theirs in welcome. 'At last, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen the salvation you promised!'

One last thought: Simeon prophesied: 'You see this child...he is for the rising and falling of many...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

We too live these words. We too have our eyes on this child more than on any other thing or any other person. We keep our eyes on him, and call others to do the same, even in the face of all our shared uncertainty about the future.

For the message that this child gives us, summed up in the words most frequently found in the New Testament, is this: 'Do not be afraid'.

Nor should we be.

Today we may well reflect on the highs and lows of religious life. But today we can also recognise something ever fresh, ever young, something that He alone brings to us.

Today let us thank God for our calling, our vocation. Thank God for all who lead us into this pathway and inspired in us its potential. Let us pray for all who accompany and lead us on this way and cheerfully dedicate ourselves anew to him.

Amen.

+Vincent Nichols