

## Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

### A Message from Fr. Mark

Happy Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary! This Thursday is November 21, the feast day of this parish! It is the day the church celebrates the ancient belief that Mary was presented by her parents in the temple when she was three years old. This event is not recorded in the Bible, and so people say that it did not really happen. It is only recorded in a document called the "Protoevangelium of James," which was written about 100 years after the New Testament books were written. It is a short "gospel" (the word "evangelium" means "gospel") which only describes the events of the birth of Mary and the birth of Jesus. It is only about seven pages long, and so to write this bulletin article I decided to read it myself. I found it online and read it because I wanted to find out what all the controversy was about. Most scholars say that it should not be taken seriously because it is not a real Gospel and it was probably not written by the apostle James. They reject it along with the "Gnostic Gospels" which were written in about the year 300 by a heretical group called the Gnostics who did not believe that Jesus was both God and man. However, some Catholic scholars now say that the Protoevangelium of James SHOULD be taken seriously because it was written very early to defend our faith that Jesus is both God and man. The whole document emphasizes that Mary was a virgin and that Jesus was, therefore, the Son of God. Just like the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it was written to combat the Ebionite heretics who claimed that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and that he was only "adopted" by God at the time of his baptism.

So, I read the thing myself. It tells the same story that we know about how Jesus was born, but it adds details to emphasize that Mary was a virgin. For example, it says that Joseph was very old and that he had to live in a separate building and that this is the way that God would "protect" Mary. It is easy to imagine that the author may have added these details because he really wanted to "prove" that Jesus was not the son of Joseph but truly the Son of God.

What about the part about the Presentation of Mary? The Protoevangelium of James says that the parents of Mary; Joachim and Ann, were old and were very sad because they had no children. Joachim was no longer allowed to serve as a priest in the temple because his sterility rendered him ritually unclean. So, he went into the desert to pray for forty days that his wife would conceive. Ann, meanwhile, also prayed and promised that if she had a child she would offer it to God in the temple: And Ann said, "As the Lord my God liveth, if I beget either male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God; and it shall minister to Him in holy things all the days of its life." God heard their prayers and they gave birth to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. They fulfilled Ann's promise when Mary was three years old: "They went up into the temple of the Lord. And the priest received her, and kissed her, and blessed her, saying: 'The Lord has magnified thy name in all generations. In thee, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel.' And he set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the Lord God sent grace upon her, and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her."

Was this part of the story also added by an author who was eager to show that Mary's virginity was "protected" by being raised in the temple? This is what almost all Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant

scholars have said because in the Bible, it says that boys were presented in the temple, but it does not say anything about girls being presented. However, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, we now know that it was quite common, at the time of Jesus, to present young boys to live a life of virginity in communities such as Qumran near the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that there may have been a similar practice for young women. The "Temple Scroll" refers to vows taken by a woman which may include vows of virginity. The "Copper Scroll" indicates that the Essenes had a community in a place called Kosiba, which since the fifth century has been identified as the place where Joachim spent his forty days of prayer (3Q15 7:14-16). The scrolls prove that celibacy was already practiced at the time of Jesus. Non-Catholic scholars are reluctant to talk about this, however, because celibacy is not part of modern Judaism and Protestantism. But Catholics can once again proclaim whole-heartedly: "Happy Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary!"