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Homily at Mass Presentation of the Lord – 2 February 2020

A very happy Lunar New Year to all our parishioners who hail from different parts of Asia. In the Church today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the day 40 days after his birth at Bethlehem when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple. After the birth of a baby, a Jewish mother was excused from Temple and synagogue worship for 7 days, and then another 33 days before she could once again participate in the Temple sacrifices. This is a bit like our idea of maternity leave – a time for the new mum to recover, to bond with her new born, to get her baby, herself and her home into some sort of routine. All of us, especially parents, know about this sort of thing.

40 days since Christmas – can you believe it? Let's think of all that has happened since the end of last year. Everyone I spoke to in Europe – taxi drivers, shop keepers, hotel reception, even a group of men talking together on the street in an Italian village – they were all vividly aware of the terrible bushfires we've experienced here in Australia. The TV news was full of it. We've experienced so much even here in inner suburban Melbourne – dense, choking smoke; a blanket of red dust; hailstones the size of golf balls; and over the last day or two our usual summer temperatures, as well as tropical humidity. People's holidays have been upended. And now school is back, and we're all back at work. But now we feel disturbed about the coronavirus which appears like a new plague, bringing sickness and death and fear in a globalized world.

40 days since Christmas and we can perhaps feel that there are shadows over our lives rather than light, and few reasons for joy, happiness, delight in life and all that surrounds us. We can perhaps feel that the darkness is only broken by the faint light of the moon.

The great symbol of today's feast of the Presentation of the Lord is the bright shining light of the sun. Tradition attests that the Holy Family entered the Temple in Jerusalem through the east gate – the gate which faced the dawning sun. As they entered, bright sunlight followed them, a sign of the bright shining light of Christ, who enters our world to dispel shadows, darkness, confusion, ignorance, fear. The light of Christ emanates from the heart of God the Father who sends his Son with a Gospel of mercy, peace, hope, joy, freedom, reconciliation, and divine friendship. Our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Catholic Churches call this feast "the Encounter": the meeting between Christ the Lord and us, his faithful people. Like the old couple Simeon and Anna, wonderfully depicted in our church windows, we recognize the little boy cradled in Mary's arms as the Son of God. Simeon's eyes were old and heavy, but they began to light up with new found joy and peace as he held in his arms the Promised Saviour. Can we hear the old and faithful Anna singing with joy? Can we hear her busily telling everyone in the Temple about the faithfulness of God – the infant Jesus born at Bethlehem, acclaimed by angels, adored by poor shepherds, and worshipped with rich and mysterious gifts by the Magi?

This is God you and I encounter every Sunday as we come to the church for Mass. We listen attentively to the scripture readings because as the Word of God is read to us we meet Christ in his living Gospel. At the altar, in the Eucharist we celebrate and receive, we meet Christ, food for eternal life, God with us.

The old man Simeon speaks to Mary about what her Son means to her and to us, “A sword of sorrow will pierce your soul”. Even in the joy of Christmas the Cross is not far away. He also speaks of Jesus “a sign of contradiction”, “a sign that will be rejected”. Jesus does contradict so much of the world’s wisdom. He is life in the midst of a culture of death – like abortion and euthanasia which casts a shadow on our society. He is the abyss of God’s mercy which drowns all our sins – when from today Victorian law obliges priests to betray the confidentiality of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He is joy and faithfulness, when so many struggle in their relationships especially married life. He is freedom and good news especially for our teenagers and young adults who can find themselves caught up in the web of vice and false happiness that their world offers. He is the community life we share as we make the choice to encounter him and his holy people, God’s family and ours, here in the Church for Mass each Sunday.