

"Secrecy and Suddenness of Divine Visitations"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. II sermon 10
St. John Henry Newman
February 2, 1831

"The kingdom of God cometh not with observation." Luke xvii. 20.

[Note 1] WE commemorate on this day the Presentation of Christ in the Temple according to the injunction of the Mosaic Law, as laid down in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus and the twelfth of Leviticus. When the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, the first-born of the Egyptians (as we all know) were visited by death, "from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne, unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the first-born of cattle." [Exod. xii. 29.] Accordingly, in thankful remembrance of this destruction, and their own deliverance, every male among the Israelites who was the first-born of his mother, was dedicated to God; likewise, every first-born of cattle. Afterwards, the Levites were taken, as God's peculiar possession, instead of the first-born [Note 2]: but still the first-born were solemnly brought to the Temple at a certain time from their birth, presented to God, and then redeemed or bought off at a certain price. At the same time certain sacrifices were offered for the mother, in order to her purification after childbirth; and therefore today's Feast, in memory of Christ's Presentation in the Temple, is commonly called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Our Saviour was born without sin. His Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, need have made no offering, as requiring no purification. On the contrary, it was that very birth of the Son of God which sanctified the whole race of woman, and turned her curse into a blessing. Nevertheless, as Christ Himself was minded to "fulfil all righteousness," to obey all ordinances of the covenant under which He was born, so in like manner His Mother Mary submitted to the Law, in order to do it reverence.

This, then, is the event in our Saviour's infancy which we this day celebrate; His Presentation in the Temple when His Virgin Mother was ceremonially purified. It was made memorable at the time by the hymns and praises of Simeon and Anna, to whom He was then revealed. And there were others, besides these, who had been "looking for redemption in Jerusalem," who were also vouchsafed a sight of the Infant Saviour. But the chief importance of this event consists in its being a fulfilment of prophecy. Malachi had announced the Lord's visitation of His Temple in these words, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His Temple;" [Malachi iii. 1] words which, though variously fulfilled during His ministry, had their first accomplishment in the humble ceremony commemorated on this day. And, when we consider the grandeur of the prediction, and how unostentatious this accomplishment was, we are led to muse upon God's ways, and to draw useful lessons for ourselves. This is the reflection which I propose to make upon the subject of this Festival.

I say, we are today reminded of the noiseless course of God's providence,—His tranquil accomplishment, in the course of nature, of great events long designed; and again, of

38 the suddenness and stillness of His visitations. Consider what the occurrence in
39 question consists in. A little child is brought to the Temple, as all first-born children were
40 brought. There is nothing here uncommon or striking, so far. His parents are with him,
41 poor people, bringing the offering of pigeons or doves, for the purification of the mother.
42 They are met in the Temple by an old man, who takes the child in his arms, offers a
43 thanksgiving to God, and blesses the parents; and next are joined by a woman of a
44 great age, a widow of eighty-four years, who had exceeded the time of useful service,
45 and seemed to be but a fit prey for death. She gives thanks also, and speaks
46 concerning the child to other persons who are present. Then all retire.

47 Now, there is evidently nothing great or impressive in this; nothing to excite the feelings,
48 or interest the imagination. We know what the world thinks of such a group as I have
49 described. The weak and helpless, whether from age or infancy, it looks upon
50 negligently and passes by. Yet all this that happened was really the solemn fulfilment of
51 an ancient and emphatic prophecy. The infant in arms was the Saviour of the world, the
52 rightful heir, come in disguise of a stranger to visit His own house. The Scripture had
53 said, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His Temple: but who may abide
54 the day of His coming, and who may stand when He appeareth?" He had now taken
55 possession. And further, the old man who took the child in his arms, had upon him the
56 gifts of the Holy Ghost, had been promised the blessed sight of his Lord before his
57 death, came into the Temple by heavenly guidance, and now had within him thoughts
58 unutterable, of joy, thankfulness, and hope, strangely mixed with awe, fear, painful
59 wonder, and "bitterness of spirit." Anna too, the woman of fourscore and four years, was
60 a prophetess; and the bystanders, to whom she spoke, were the true Israel, who were
61 looking out in faith for the predicted redemption of mankind, those who (in the words of
62 the prophecy) "sought" and in prospect "delighted" in the "Messenger" of God's
63 covenant of mercy. "The glory of this latter House shall be greater than of the former,"
64 [Haggai ii. 9.] was the announcement made in another prophecy. Behold the glory; a
65 little child and his parents, two aged persons, and a congregation without name or
66 memorial. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation."

67 Such has ever been the manner of His visitations, in the destruction of His enemies as
68 well as in the deliverance of His own people;—silent, sudden, unforeseen, as regards
69 the world, though predicted in the face of all men, and in their measure comprehended
70 and waited for by His true Church. Such a visitation was the flood; Noah a preacher of
71 righteousness, but the multitude of sinners judicially blinded. "They did eat, they drank,
72 they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the
73 ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all." Such was the overthrow of Sodom and
74 Gomorrah. "Likewise as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought,
75 they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it
76 rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all." [Luke xvii. 27-29.]
77 Again, "The horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the
78 sea, and the Lord brought again the waters of the sea upon them." [Exod. xv. 19.] The
79 overthrow of Sennacherib was also silent and sudden, when his vast army least
80 expected it: "The Angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a
81 hundred fourscore and five thousand." [Isa. xxxvii. 36.] Belshazzar and Babylon were

82 surprised in the midst of the king's great feast to his thousand lords. While
83 Nebuchadnezzar boasted, his reason was suddenly taken from him. While the multitude
84 shouted with impious flattery at Herod's speech, then "the Angel of the Lord smote him,
85 because he gave not God the glory." [Acts xii. 23.] Whether we take the first or the final
86 judgment upon Jerusalem, both visitations were foretold as sudden. Of the former,
87 Isaiah had declared it should come "*suddenly*, at an instant;" [Isa. xxx. 13.] of the latter,
88 Malachi, "The Lord whom ye seek shall *suddenly* come to His Temple." And such, too,
89 will be His final visitation of the whole earth: men will be at their work in the city and in
90 the field, and it will overtake them like a thunder-cloud. "Two women shall be grinding
91 together; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two men shall be in the field; the
92 one shall be taken, and the other left." [Luke xvii. 35, 36.]

93 And it is impossible that it should be otherwise, in spite of warnings ever so clear,
94 considering how the world goes on in every age. Men, who are plunged in the pursuits
95 of active life, are no judges of its course and tendency on the whole. They confuse great
96 events with little, and measure the importance of objects, as in perspective, by the mere
97 standard of nearness or remoteness. It is only at a distance that one can take in the
98 outlines and features of a whole country. It is but holy Daniel, solitary among princes, or
99 Elijah the recluse of Mount Carmel, who can withstand Baal, or forecast the time of
100 God's providences among the nations. To the multitude all things continue to the end,
101 as they were from the beginning of the creation. The business of state affairs, the
102 movements of society, the course of nature, proceed as ever, till the moment of Christ's
103 coming. "The sun was risen upon the earth," bright as usual, on that very day of wrath in
104 which Sodom was destroyed. Men cannot believe their own time is an especially wicked
105 time; for, with Scripture unstudied and hearts untrained in holiness, they have no
106 standard to compare it with. They take warning from no troubles or perplexities, which
107 rather carry them away to search out the earthly causes of them, and the possible
108 remedies. They consider them as conditions of this world, necessary results of this or
109 that state of society. When the power of Assyria became great (we might suppose), the
110 Jews had a plain call to repentance. Far from it; they were led to set power against
111 power: they took refuge against Assyria in Egypt, their old enemy. Probably they
112 reasoned themselves into what they considered a temperate, enlightened, cheerful view
113 of national affairs; perhaps they might consider the growth of Assyria as an advantage
114 rather than otherwise, as balancing the power of Egypt, and so tending to their own
115 security. Certain it is, we find them connecting themselves first with one kingdom, and
116 then with the other, as men who could read (as they thought) "the signs of the times,"
117 and made some pretences to political wisdom. Thus the world proceeds till wrath comes
118 upon it and there is no escape. "Tomorrow," they say, "shall be as this day, and much
119 more abundant." [Isa. lvi. 12.]

120 And in the midst of this their revel, whether of sensual pleasure, or of ambition, or of
121 covetousness, or of pride and self-esteem, the decree goes forth to destroy. The decree
122 goes forth in secret; Angels hear it, and the favoured few on earth; but no public event
123 takes place to give the world warning. The earth was doomed to the flood one hundred
124 and twenty years before the "decree brought forth," [Zeph. ii. 2.] or men heard of it. The
125 waters of Babylon had been turned, and the conqueror was marching into the city, when

126 Belshazzar made his great feast. Pride infatuates man, and self-indulgence and luxury
127 work their way unseen,—like some smouldering fire, which for a while leaves the
128 outward form of things unaltered. At length the decayed mass cannot hold together, and
129 breaks by its own weight, or on some slight and accidental external violence. As the
130 Prophet says: "This iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out (or
131 bulging) in a high wall, whose breaking cometh *suddenly at an instant*." The same
132 inward corruption of a nation seems to be meant in our Lord's words, when He says of
133 Jerusalem: "Wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together."
134 [Matt. xxiv. 28.]

135 Thoughts such as the foregoing are profitable at all times; for in every age the world is
136 profane and blind, and God hides His providence, yet carries it forward. But they are
137 peculiarly apposite now, in proportion as the present day bears upon it more marks than
138 usual of pride and judicial blindness. Whether Christ is at our doors or not, but a few
139 men in England may have grace enough safely to conjecture; but that He is calling upon
140 us all to prepare as for His coming, is most evident to those who have religious eyes
141 and ears. Let us then turn this Festival to account, by taking it as the Memorial-day of
142 His visitations. Let us from the events it celebrates, lay up deep in our hearts the
143 recollection, how mysteriously little things are in this world connected with great; how
144 single moments, improved or wasted, are the salvation or ruin of all-important interests.
145 Let us bear the thought upon us, when we come to worship in God's House, that any
146 such season of service may, for what we know, be wonderfully connected with some
147 ancient purpose of His, announced before we were born, and may have its determinate
148 bearing on our eternal welfare; let us fear to miss the Saviour, while Simeon and Anna
149 find Him. Let us remember that He was not manifested again in the Temple, except
150 once, for thirty years, while a whole generation, who were alive at His first visitation,
151 died off in the interval. Let us carry this thought into our daily conduct; considering that,
152 for what we know, our hope of salvation may in the event materially depend on our
153 avoiding this or that momentary sin. And further, from the occurrences of this day let us
154 take comfort, when we despond about the state of the Church. Perhaps we see not
155 God's tokens; we see neither prophet nor teacher remaining to His people; darkness
156 falls over the earth, and no protesting voice is heard. Yet, granting things to be at the
157 very worst, still, when Christ was presented in the Temple, the age knew as little of it as
158 it knows of His providence now. Rather, the worse our condition is, the nearer to us is
159 the Advent of our Deliverer. Even though He is silent, doubt not that His army is on the
160 march towards us. He is coming through the sky, and has even now His camp upon the
161 outskirts of our own world. Nay, though He still for a while keep His seat at His Father's
162 right hand, yet surely He sees all that is going on, and waits and will not fail His hour of
163 vengeance. Shall He not hear His own elect, when they cry day and night to Him? His
164 Services of prayer and praise continue, and are scorned by the multitude. Day by day,
165 Festival by Festival, Fast after Fast, Season by Season, they continue according to His
166 ordinance, and are scorned. But the greater His delay, the heavier will be His
167 vengeance, and the more complete the deliverance of His people.

168 May the good Lord save His Church in this her hour of peril; when Satan seeks to sap
169 and corrupt where he dare not openly assault! May He raise up instruments of His

170 grace, "not ignorant of the devices" of the Evil One, with seeing eyes, and strong hearts,
171 and vigorous arms to defend the treasure of the faith once committed to the Saints, and
172 to arouse and alarm their slumbering brethren! "For Sion's sake will I not hold my
173 peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth
174 as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth ... Ye that make mention
175 of the Lord, keep not silence, and give Him no rest, till He establish, and till He make
176 Jerusalem a praise in the earth ... Go through, go through the gates: prepare ye the way
177 of the people; cast up, cast up the highway, gather out the stones, lift up a standard for
178 the people. [Isa. lxii. 1, 6, 7, 10.] Thus does Almighty God address His "watchmen on
179 the walls of Jerusalem;" and to the Church herself He says, to our great comfort: "No
180 weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise
181 against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the
182 Lord, and their righteousness is of Me, saith the Lord." [Isa. liv. 17.]

Notes

1. The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
2. Numb. iii. 12, 13.