

## April 2017 – The Joyful Mysteries



Giovanni Bellini (Venice, c. 1433 – 1513), *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, c. 1460, tempera on panel, 82 cm x 106 cm, Venice, Fondazione Querini Stampalia

The panel presents a crowd of people in a small space behind a marble balustrade. The picture is probably rich in meaning for the artist if, as it seems, the young man portrayed on the right is Giovanni Bellini himself, while the woman on the opposite side should be his wife Ginevra.

Let's focus on the central scene: under the watchful eye of Joseph, at the centre, there's the old Simeon on the right and Maria, holding the baby Jesus standing, on the left.

According to the Jewish tradition, 40 days after birth the mother had to purify and redeem the firstborn son (as reported in Exodus 13) through the offering of a lamb or two doves (cf. Leviticus 12).

However, Mary, whose beauty shines with the whiteness of her skin that seems to be reflected by her veil, just as candid and full of light, seems to hesitate to entrust Jesus to Simeon, who is

waiting to welcome him with his open arms. The mother seems to want back that child so small but whose short life has already been marked by mysterious episodes. Why is it so? Perhaps the key to the mother's thoughtful attitude is in the bandages completely wrapping the child: they are the "bands" in which newborns were wrapped, of course, but they also seem to prefigure the "bandage" with which corpses were wrapped before burial. John wrote: "They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen cloths with the spices ..." (19:40).

Besides, as Luke the Evangelist wrote, Simeon himself told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul (cf. Luke 2:35): that's why she's so upset!

Centuries later, we, the spectators, can well understand her turmoil, because we know that Mary will have to bind up the lifeless body of her beloved Son.

Yet, although all these sequences seem to dramatically run before Mary's eyes, we can see her in the foreground, there, staying and not fleeing despite the future that Simeon foretold. Perhaps Mary does not understand the pain that is prophesied, but she keeps it in her heart (cf. Luke 2:51): it is her constant way of acting.

In the difficult and demanding situations of daily life, when we feel powerless, we are also proposed the option of staying, without running away nor circumventing the obstacles. Mary showed us that this is the way to build a full life: not by resigning passively to the pain, but with the ability to fit with extreme confidence in the providential plan of God.