

“The Presentation in the Temple”

Luke 2: 22-40

Christmas 2C (Presentation), Boise, 2022 [after Cheyenne & Fort Collins, 2003; Redding, 2014]

The Gospel we just read, from St Luke, gives us the story of what will be the subject of a feast we observe on February 2: The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. The OT reading, from Jeremiah, is a prophecy of the Jews' Return from exile, but it really goes better with the Gospel for Epiphany, which we will read at our celebration this Thursday. A better OT text for the Gospel we read is also about the Return to Zion, but more specifically about the Return of the Yahweh's glory to the rebuilt Temple. It is found in Malachi: “the LORD, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his Temple . . . [Mal 3: 1a]. Such occurred when Joseph and Mary, fulfilling a requirement of the Torah, brought the Christ Child to the Temple on his fortieth day. For as long as the ceremony lasted, and at later times in his earthly life, the glory of the Lord was again present at that place in his incarnate son.

As St Luke told us, the parents offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving, or, to use the language of the Torah, a sacrifice of redemption. According to that law, the firstborn male belongs to God. By offering a couple of turtle-doves or pigeons, Joseph and Mary were, in ritualistic fashion, redeeming (or buying back) their son for their own keeping. The ceremony also had another purpose, from which we get the more familiar name of the Christian feast, The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which English churchgoers sometimes call “Lady Day.” The appearance of the Holy Family in the Temple to offer sacrifice was the first time the mother was

allowed in public after giving birth. Until that time, or for a period of forty days, she was considered, by the strictures of the Torah, to be ritually unclean. In general, anything that involved the shedding of blood made a person ritually unclean and thus necessitated some kind of ceremony of cleansing.

All that, I know, sounds very peculiar and a bit arcane, but it does remind us once again that the persons in the story — Mary, Joseph, and Jesus — were 1st-century Jews, observant Jews, adhering to the Torah in all its particulars. Medieval Christians, even though they could not very well keep the Jewish ritual, liked to invent parallel Christian rites. Hence, we have, in our own Prayer Book, an old ceremony called “Thanksgiving for the Birth . . . of a Child,” and also called in earlier editions of the Prayer Book “the churching of women.” The service provides a ceremonial welcome to a woman coming back to the church with her newborn child after her recovery from the arduous feat of giving birth. We performed the ceremony once when we were at St Mark’s School. We are now living in an age when most churches want to dispense with ceremony, but throughout most of the Christian era, the Catholic churchgoer did not want to be outdone by the synagogue.

But all that is really beside the point of today’s Gospel. According to St Luke, when Mary and Joseph brought their 40-day old son to the Temple to perform their religious duty, some extraordinary things occurred. God used the ritual of the sacrifice to reveal that the time was drawing nigh when it would no longer be needed. The offerings commanded by the Torah would be replaced by the Offering on the Cross and its commemoration in the

Eucharist. The old man Simeon, taking the child in his arms and blessing him, prophesied that nothing would ever again be the same; that the child, just by the fact of who he was, would some day bring a crisis on his people: he “is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be opposed.” And then, addressing Jesus’ mother, the old man added, “a sword shall pierce through your own soul also.” Anna the prophetess testified that the infant would bring redemption to Jerusalem; but, as we have noted in previous weeks, with redemption comes also judgment, for all to whom it is brought are confronted with the decision of whether or not to accept it. Our Lord is “the glory of his people, Israel,” which is the terrible glory of God revealed; and he is also “the light to lighten the Gentiles,” thus confronting us non-Jews too with a decision. Will we accept the truth when it is revealed? the truth about God? the truth about ourselves? Or will we prefer instead to remain in darkness, where we are less likely to be disturbed? The time was drawing nigh, Anna and Simeon prophesied, when all would have to decide.

The first advent of our Lord was the dividing line of human history. The story of his birth, which begins with the old religion and the old ritual (and yet also contains intimations of the new) is a reminder that history is an essential part of Christianity, just as it is for Judaism. The Gospel cannot be reduced to a set of doctrines or ethical principles that we can believe or practice without regard to the beliefs and practices of the people who lived before us. Christianity is, before all else, a story — a story which is preceded by another story, concerning Abraham and his descendants. The history I am referring to here is not the history of the United States or of Britain or of Japan or of Africa. The history that the Christian religion and its

predecessor Judaism encompass is the history of salvation.

Somewhere back in prehistoric time, man fell from the original state of innocence in which he was created. Sometime later, after the dawn of civilization, God chose a people to whom to reveal his truth — progressively, over time. And that is the story of ancient Israel, with its Exodus, and Law delivered from the mountain, and prophets, priests, and kings. The story reached its climax with the birth of the Messiah, who was, during his short life on earth, to reveal God's truth more fully than it had ever been revealed before, and to establish a church that would take it from Israel to the other nations. Those events began another story in which we here today are characters. The drama continues, and you cannot really know what chapter in which you yourselves appear unless you are familiar with the plot as it has developed thus far. I know that to describe Christianity thus makes it seem a very complicated business. But Christianity is not one of those religions that teach us simply to live in the moment, without regard for what has gone before. Our religion is in some respects bafflingly complex, rather like life itself; for Christianity is life, the life of God as it has been revealed in the affairs of men and women over time. And that is a very complicated story indeed, wonderfully complicated, with many plots and subplots and characters that take a long time to reach their full development. God has not finished with you; he has not finished with me, either, and he has certainly not finished with history.

Here, at the time of the Christ child's presentation in the Temple, and of his mother's ritual purification after giving birth, we are still near the beginning of the story, at a place where it overlaps a bit with the preceding

story of ancient Israel. The plot thickens with Anna and Simeon's prophecies. They tell us that the old ritual, which had served God's people well for over a thousand years and came to be performed in the Temple, was near the end of its life. With the appearance of the Messiah, both the ritual and the Second Temple accomplished their purpose and would now give way to newer rites, based on the New Sacrifice made at Calvary, and the temple that is Christ's Body. The Gospel is indeed the Greatest Story ever told, and inasmuch as it involves us, it is not over. We still await the final Apocalypse when the end will be revealed, the great Consummation in which Heaven and earth will be joined. And with that end we shall attain our end, our own characters reaching their full development, eternally happy or eternally miserable. Those two states, and those only, will be left when the conclusion is written.

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