

Presentation of Christ in the Temple 31st Jan 2021

Gospel: Luke 2:22 – 40

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be Revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Opening Prayer –

Father God, we give you thanks for the wonders of the technology that brings us together today. May the words we hear inspire our hearts and minds to serve you and glorify your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon – Full Understanding

In the Church's calendar, 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple – also known as 'Candlemas', is celebrated as a Holy Day on 2nd February, which is this coming Tuesday. You don't have to be a mathematical wizard to work out that 2nd February is forty days after Jesus was born; but we are celebrating today because it is the closest Sunday.

You might be tempted to think that the Presentation in the Temple was about the proud parents showing off their beautiful baby boy to the priest and receiving some words of wisdom with a blessing; but that was only a small part of what actually took place. To get the full story we need to look at the 'what, why and when' of the event; but how can we do that?

You could go to a Christian bookshop and buy something off their well-stocked shelves, but I can suggest a better starting point. The Old Testament often provides explanations to events of the New Testament era; and this is one such occasion. But there are 39 books in the Old Testament so where do you look? A good knowledge of the Bible would help and one way you could gain this is to join a Christian study group.

On Wednesday evenings Vicar Simon is leading a group of us in discussing many aspects of the Christian faith. At the moment we are looking at the 'what, why and when' of the Bible – all done on Zoom of course. We don't need to have any prior knowledge, and we can just look and listen if we prefer. If you are interested, I'm sure Vicar Simon would be happy to tell you how you can join us.

Well, that's the end of the Discussion Group promo, let's get back to today's story. Let me remind you of the opening sentence of our Bible reading from Luke's Gospel:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

So, what is this passing reference to 'the time of purification' about?

Purification was a requirement of Jewish law in which the mother of a male child had to undergo forty days of cleansing from the blood of childbirth and then to present herself and her child at the temple with an offering. Interestingly, the process was different for a female child.

Within the Temple, the Purification ritual was a consecration of both the mother and child's lives to God; while the offering was a sign of thanksgiving and gratitude for safe delivery of the child, and the continued health of the mother. Parents that

could afford to, offered a temple lamb for sacrifice. Those who couldn't afford a lamb offered two turtledoves or two pigeons, as Joseph and Mary did.

Our Bible reading continues:

..... as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'.

To find the origin of this law we need to look in Exodus chapter 13 vs 1 – 2 which says:

The Lord said to Moses; consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals is mine.

So, the law derives from that time when the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt and Moses was trying to convince Pharaoh to let them leave. God sent many plagues on Egypt, the last being the death of every first born animal and human in the land, even Pharaoh's son died. But the angel of death 'passed over' the Hebrew people; they and their animals were spared and allowed to leave Egypt. 40 years later when they left the desert and settled in the Promised Land, the law was passed that, as an act of remembrance, when a first animal or male child was born, it was to be dedicated to the Lord. This meant that every first-born animal had to be offered as a sacrifice and every first-born male child had to enter into the service of the Temple.

That was a pretty tough obligation on the child so the parents were permitted to redeem their son by paying 5 silver coins to the priest – see the book Leviticus for more detail. Jesus was, of course, the first-born son of Mary, and we know he didn't become a temple servant, so the redemption money must have been paid by Joseph and Mary.

After they had done all that was required under Jewish Law, Joseph and Mary were approached by an elderly man named Simeon who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. He took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:28–32).

These words are known as the Nunc Dimittis and are still used in some of our church services today.

Simeon prophesied that Jesus would be:

“A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel”.

These words are the origin of the second title of today's celebration; with the emphasis being on 'light'. It became a Church tradition that on this Holy Day the predominant source of light, beeswax candles, were blessed for use both in churches and in private homes throughout the year – hence the title 'Candlemas'.

Simeon also told Mary:

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

He was telling Joseph and Mary that their son was the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. But the road Jesus was to take would be extremely difficult and violently opposed. It would lead to the piercing of Mary's soul, and the breaking of her heart.

Having seen the promise of the Holy Spirit fulfilled, Simeon felt his life was complete and he was ready to die in peace.

There was an old woman named Anna in the Temple too. She also recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but her reaction was very different to Simeon's. She was 84 years old, but unlike Simeon, she was not yet ready to die. Like the disciples who would follow her, she was compelled to bear witness to what she had seen. Luke tells us:

“At that moment, she came and began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Mary was the first to have the good news announced to her, but Anna was the first woman to understand the significance and spread the good news. This was because, as Luke tells us, Anna was a “prophet” (Luke 2:36). In fact, she is the only woman in the New Testament explicitly described as a “prophet.” You can read about other woman prophets in the Old Testament.

Unlike Simeon however, Anna was not just visiting the Temple for the day; we are told she:

“... never left the Temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37).

Anna's husband had died after only seven years of marriage; so perhaps she was part of some sort of 'order of widows' who had specific daily religious functions in the Temple.

However, not everyone can have the understanding of a prophet. Mary didn't understand what Anna immediately recognised; and she wouldn't for many years. Here's another example of Mary's misunderstanding

Every year Joseph and Mary went up to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover. The origin of this festival is in the Exodus from Egypt of the Hebrew people, and you know where you can read more about that. When Jesus was twelve years old, his parents took him with them, but when they left for home Jesus stayed behind, engaging in questions and answers with the teachers in the Temple. Mary and Joseph searched for him frantically and when they found him Mary asked:

“Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Jesus responded, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” but they did not understand what he had said to them (Luke 2:48–51).

Complete understanding of who Jesus was, and acceptance of the Word of God came to Mary much later through the ministry of Jesus and particularly through the cross and resurrection. When the apostles gathered in the upper room after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Mary was with them as a leading figure (Acts 1:14).

If we try to live our Christian lives in isolation, we run the risk of never really understanding what it is to be a Christian. Like Mary, the significance of the events of Jesus’ life and ministry are understood incrementally over the span of many years. Insight into God’s intentions is a gift which keeps on giving and renewing us, the people of God; and at the outset of a long chain of prophetic insights we find Simeon and Anna, one satisfied that prophecy had been fulfilled and the other pointing to the future – a future as bright as the promises of God.

May we continue to grow in knowledge, understanding and love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.