

Sermon – Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ

Luke 2:22-40

Today we are celebrating the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in The Temple. This Feast Day marks the formal end of the seasons of the Nativity and the Epiphany. This commemoration is one of the oldest major feast days on the church calendar. The first recorded service dates back to at least 312 CE, when a sermon was given by Methodius of Patara, and then later Cyril of Jerusalem in 360 CE. Egeria, one of the unsung women of our faith, documented the liturgy of the Presentation in her writings on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 381-384 CE. It was there that she heard a sermon preached on Luke 2:22.

An alternate name for today is the Feast of the purification of the Virgin, as it marks 40 days since Mary gave birth to Jesus. On the fortieth day Mary was required to complete the rite of purification set down in the Law. We find the requirements for this rite in Leviticus Chapter 12. Once completed, Mary was able to access the temple once again, which was necessary for the presentation of her son to God, another ritual required by the Law.

The presentation of the first born in the temple was important. The ritual celebrated the requirement for the exodus peoples who settled in the land of Canaan, to set apart for the Lord their first-born son and all of their first-born male animals. The details of this offering to God can be found in Exodus Chapter 13. So Jesus, the first born of Mary was to be set apart for God and formally presented and offered up to God in the Temple.

During this season of Epiphany, our lectionary gospel readings have touched on the early part of Jesus life, from his time as a baby honored by the wise men, to John the Baptist's ministry of preparation for Jesus, to his baptism, and recently, to Jesus, the man on the cusp of his new ministry, calling the first of his disciples. Each reading contained one key element of similarity, that is the manifestation of Jesus to the wider community. Jesus, as the promised Messiah, was the light that was to give illumination to God in the world.

The canon of scripture that we call the Bible, centers on these gospel narratives. The preceding Hebrew texts largely describe the evolution of peoples' understanding of God and contain the predictions that someone greater than the prophets would come into the world to save people from themselves. The later apostolic letters set out how the good news of Jesus filtered out into the world and changed lives and whole communities.

The book of Malachi is the last of the Hebrew texts. Our reading this morning from Malachi centers on his prediction that the Messenger of God would soon be coming into the world as a purifying force. Malachi found himself disgusted by the corruption of the priesthood and noted that was sorely in need of refining and purification. The Messenger that he predicts was to come as the refining power and in such a way that his power would literally floor people. But the Lord promised that if people turned back to God, then God will also turn back to them. And

this was and still is the mission of the church. That is to help facilitate the reconciliation between God and God's people.

Finally, Malachi proclaimed that the Lord would send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord, so as to prepare people's hearts. His prophecy links seamlessly to the beginning of earliest gospel account of Mark. It is Mark's gospel that commences with the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness who is known as the new messenger. Jesus describes in Matthew's narrative John the Baptist as "Elijah who is to come." So we have this wonderful connection between these two narratives that bridge some 450 years.

Jesus as we know came into the world, emptied of the great power of God, so that he could start life as a true human being, a baby. He shared our flesh and blood as the writer of the book of Hebrews states, however there was one important difference. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, he overcame the one power that embodied death and freed all those who were held in slavery by the fear of death.

Importantly, the writer of Hebrews tell us that Jesus did not come into the world to help angels, rather it was to help the descendants of Abraham, who through subsequent covenants includes all of us. He became like us in every respect we are told, to make the necessary sacrifices for our sins. He understood our pain and because he too suffered, he is able to help us all as we are tested in various ways in our lives. We can draw comfort knowing that Jesus lived through the joys and certain disappoints of life, just as we do.

Mary and Joseph were faithful parents in raising Jesus. They followed the necessary rituals of their faith. So it was that Jesus as their first-born son was to be offered to God and so Jesus was presented to the Lord in the temple ritual. His parents also offered the required sacrifice of thanksgiving. It is here that Luke provides an insight into Jesus life with his parents. The sacrifice that they offered of two turtledoves or a pair of pigeons was the sacrifice of the poor. The well-off were to offer a lamb and a turtledove or pigeon. So right from the beginning of his life, Jesus is aligned with the poor, because he came in poverty, and knew the life.

The presentation of Jesus in the temple is witnessed by two faithful and devout elders, Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna are great role models for all the elders of our churches. Patient and dedicated, willing to listen to the prompting of God, and giving witness to the younger families without fear or favor.

Simeon finds himself drawn to the temple by the spirit of God. When he arrives he is drawn to this child and his parents. He knew deep in his soul that he was not to die before he saw the Lord's Messiah. This expectation must have weighed on him each and every day wondering how God was to reveal the Messiah to him. Malachi's proclamation after all was by this time some 400 years old.

Simeon's faith led him to Jesus, and on seeing him he scooped him up into his arms before uttering these famous words, "Lord, you are now dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen the savior, which you have prepared for all the world to see." These words would be familiar to you if you pray Evening Prayer. They are the *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for 'now you are dismissing.' Simeon had seen the Messiah and now was ready to depart his life.

Anna had a similar experience or though her words are not recorded here in the gospel according to Luke. Anna was 84 years old, a great age in any time, and a widow. She found refuge in the temple and there worshipped, prayed and fasted night and day demonstrating her devout faith. When Jesus was presented she began to praise God for him and spoke out in the temple about the child, presumably exclaiming to all that would listen that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was to come and redeem Jerusalem.

This baby, Simeon told Mary and Joseph, was to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel. He was to be a sign of God's love and justice that would ultimately be opposed and he would cause the inner thoughts of many to be revealed. Simeon hailed the Christ-child as "a light for the revelation to the Gentiles" but ended his joyous prophecy on a stark note. He told Mary that her soul would be pierced by the sword of death, predicting the untimely end of her son's life.

Mary and Joseph were good parents who followed the Law and listened to God. They protected Jesus from Herod, and later brought him out into the open to present him to his Father in heaven, and to the world. The two exemplify the self-giving love of God, the only love that can liberate all of us, and humanity as a whole, from the prison of self-absorption.

The purity of all of us as followers of Jesus Christ, flows from Jesus, the head of the church. With his parents we are both redeemed by and drawn into his self-offering. This is the message of our collect for today: because of the sacrifice of Christ, who was this day presented in the Temple, in substance of our flesh, we can now ask that we be presented to God, with pure and clean hearts, by his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

As this season of Epiphany draws to a close we can be assured, and comforted, to know that God took great pains to reveal Jesus to the world all those years ago. It is from the dedicated writings of the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, and the apostles, that we are able to understand that Jesus did come into the world as a beacon of new light, to shine for us so that we might come out of our old lives, and into a new life of light and love, a new life absent of the fear of death.

Let's carry this epiphany message out of this building to all those that still live in the darkness of this world.

Amen