

Candlemas

Malachi 3.1-5 • Psalm 24.[1-6]7-10 • Hebrews 2.14-18 • Luke 2.22-40

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Today's gospel is a story of completion. The tale of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple rounds off the birth narrative in Luke's gospel. In amongst those narratives Luke has given us a series of the great songs that continue to resound through our worship today – the Magnificat of Mary, the Benedictus of Zechariah, the angels' song of 'Gloria' to God in the highest, and now the 'Nunc Dimittis' of Simeon, a fitting close to these wondrous stories. And our closing story of these birth narratives, a story that forty days after Jesus' birth finally draws our celebrations of Christ's revealing to a close, is a beautiful moment of dedication.

This dedication of Christ in the Temple is deeply soaked in the Old Testament. Luke draws on three strands of the scriptures as he develops his story of Christ's presentation in the Temple. 'When the time came for their purification', Luke begins. And the journey made by Mary and Joseph is, in the first place, one of purification. It is a journey made in obedience to the law laid down in the Book of Leviticus that, after a woman gives birth to a boy, she is impure for forty days. At the end of that period, she is to bring an offering to the priest – a lamb or, if she cannot afford this, two turtle-doves or two pigeons. The priest offers what is given as a sacrifice, effecting her purification.¹

But then, Luke continues, 'as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"'. And

¹ Leviticus 12. The line here, along with some more detail of the three Old Testament passages on which Luke draws here, is taken from *Working Preacher* 2014 - https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2258.

this quotation from the law is drawn not from Leviticus but from the Book of Exodus (Ex 13.1, 11-16). Here we are in the moment after the Passover, as the Israelites journey towards the Red Sea. And at this moment the Lord gives the Israelites a new commandment. The Lord saved the firstborn sons of the Israelites at the Passover. In remembrance of this, all parents are to offer a gift to the priest (elsewhere in the Torah this is laid down as five shekels (Num 3.46-51)) to redeem their child. There is nothing to do here with purity or purification – the redemption here is a matter of recognising that the life of their firstborn son is a gift from God.

And then we have a third moment in the Old Testament which is in the background here. Neither Leviticus nor Exodus envisage that the sacrifice, or the act of redemption, take place in the Temple. But there is one story of a young child presented in the Temple that is clearly on Luke's mind. When Hannah, who had no children, prayed to God for a son, she vowed that, if she had a son, she would give him to God for all his days (1 Samuel 1.11). And indeed, after her child Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple, and he was 'lent' to the Lord for life, serving in the Temple under the priest Eli (1 Samuel 1.24-28). It is clear from the way that Luke tells his story that we are to see echoes of Hannah in Mary, and echoes of Samuel in Jesus. Yet one crucial difference is that while Samuel is left in the Temple, Jesus is not. He is to be 'holy to the Lord' in the world.

From the eleventh century onwards the Western church began to offer a rite which became known as 'churaching'.² Forty days after safely giving birth, the new mother would appear at the church porch with her midwife and two other women. She carried a lighted candle, in reference to our feast today and its popular name of Candlemas. The priest recited two psalms in celebration of God's protection and God's blessing of childbirth, sprinkled her with holy

² The details of the medieval practice of churaching are taken from Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England*, (Yale University Press, 2021), pp.314-6.

water, and led her into church. Commonly mass was celebrated with the new mother first to receive the holy bread. And for those with means, a feast seems often to have followed.

By the time churching died out in the decades after the Second World War, it had become a stricter process. There was a social expectation that this trip to church on the fortieth day would be the new mother's first trip outside. And people often came with a strong sense that this was a moment of purification from the metaphorical stain of blood and the sexual act of conception.

Consider, by contrast, the emphasis of the original medieval rite. The church was insistent that there was no prohibition on women coming to church earlier than forty days after childbirth, though it recognised many found this a helpful devotion. The emphasis is not on purification but on the celebration of a safe birth, and through the eucharist of the creation of a new member of the Body of Christ.

I am not suggesting a wholesale return to the ritual of churching, though I am aware of one or two historically-minded friends who have as new mothers valued – I think in semi-romantic fashion – the chance to enter into this aspect of our Christian heritage.

But if we hold in our minds that contrast of the rather single-minded and negative associations of churching in its final decades, and the far richer and more celebratory mood of its medieval practice, it helps us see the even more numerous connotations of Luke's account of the Presentation. For in Luke's account, yes, this Presentation is a moment for Mary and for her purification. But it is also a moment when the infant Jesus is redeemed, recognised as the gift of God. And it is the moment when Mary and Jesus together, like Hannah with Samuel in her arms, come in gratitude and dedication.

Jesus is dedicated. Not set apart as entirely different. But offered as holy in a way that recognises the great gift of God that he is to Mary, and to the world. In the interwoven strands of scriptural passages on which Luke draws we have a sign that it is through this figure that the deliverance of Israel – its purification, its

redemption, its renewal in holiness – will be accomplished. And in the words of Simeon and Anna we hear the warning of the path down which this devotion will lead him.

This is a moment of dedication. And it is by the same token a moment of completion, when we leave behind the infant Jesus and prepare to encounter him in his adulthood. For there is one final way in which Luke signals that this story rounds off his narrative of Jesus's birth. When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, Mary's response is one of trust: 'Let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1.38). Now, at the end of Luke's birth narratives, Simeon's words of thanksgiving take up the same tune: 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word' (Luke 2.29). And we too now follow in Christ's path, dedicating ourselves to offer ourselves in holiness, according to the word and promise of God.