

ADDRESS	2 February 2020	The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Malachi 3.1-4	The Lord comes to his temple	
Psalms 24	The earth is the Lord's	
Hebrews 2.14-18	The humanity of Christ	
Luke 2.22-40	The presentation of Christ in the Temple	

Today is the 40th day after Christmas, and this day has been a Christian festival for at least 1 500 years. We have records of ceremonies in the first Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on this day in the 4th century.

Today is still a feast day in many parts of the church, under any of three names. Each of these three names has something to teach us about God's plan for humankind, for us. The two earlier names also tell us a good deal about the Jewish law which Jesus freed his people from.

The earliest name for today's commemoration is *The feast of the Purification of St Mary the Virgin*.

This is a day to honour the obedience of the girl who consented to bear the Son of God despite the shame of having a child while unmarried. According to Jewish law, in the book of Leviticus, her childbearing made her impure, and she was required to purify herself before she could again take part in the rituals of the temple.

Our reading today says, *and when the time for their purification had come*. This follows what scholars believe are the best surviving manuscripts of the original Greek. But other manuscripts say *and when the time for her purification had come*. This makes more sense, as Jewish law did not require the father to be purified after his child was born.

The book of Leviticus (Lev. 12.6) requires the mother to make two offerings at the time of her purification -- an "*olah*," or burnt offering, and a "*ḥatat*," or sin offering. Clearly, by Mary's time, these two offerings had been combined, as we are told she offered **two** pigeons or turtledoves, one for each offering.

The burnt offering was to restore her place in the worshipping community; that is clear, but scholars do not agree on the reason for her sin offering – after all, having a child is no sin, the Torah urges us to be fruitful and multiply, but it also tells us that Eve was cursed for her disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit of the Garden: *In pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you*. (Gen. 3.16)

So some rabbinical scholars argue that, since the birthing mother's suffering derives from Eve's sin, she needs to bring an offering to help atone for that sin. What matters for us is that, through his human mother, Christ our Saviour is fully human, as well as fully divine.

Centuries later, there are two survivals of this ancient purification ceremony in our latest prayer book. One is the thanksgiving for the birth of a child on page 41 – in ancient times, childbirth was dangerous as well as painful. Mary had no doctor or midwife, no anaesthetic, no sterile sheets or bandages. In childbirth, life and death come perilously close, still, so the church has always offered services of thanksgiving for the survival of mother and child.

The other reminder of the purification is in the first order for the Holy Communion on page 108, which is derived from a service in the old Book of Common Prayer. There we are urged to examine ourselves before presuming to eat of that bread and drink of that cup. In the original exhortation this examination is clearly seen as purification -- we do this so that we *may come holy and clean to such a heavenly Feast*.

When we share the Holy Communion every week, it is easy to *receive it unworthily*, as the prayer book puts it – for our thoughts to wander, for us to chatter to our friends, rather than to share the heavenly feast in reverent silence, and focus our thoughts on its meaning and significance, to glory that the curses placed on both Adam and Eve have been lifted by the self-sacrifice of Jesus.

In the second order for the Holy Communion, the one we generally use, the confession is a form of purification -- we repent of our sins, and receive absolution. This is our assurance that we have been purified and set free from all our sins, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The second name for today's feast is *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*.

The origin of this ritual is in the story of the original Passover, in the book of Exodus (Ex.13.13-15). On the night when the Lord slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt to force the Pharaoh to let his people go, the firstborn of the children of Israel were redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb. From then on, Jewish parents were commanded to offer their firstborn male child to the Lord, or to redeem him by making a sacrifice in the Temple.

Which is what Mary and Joseph did, to the joy of the aged witnesses, Simeon and Anna. We are told that Anna was of the tribe of Asher, one of the 10 so-called lost tribes of Israel, whose leaders had been carried off by the Assyrians about 720 years earlier. Anna came from one of the families which had maintained its Jewish heritage, and Anna, like Simeon, had been blessed with long life, so that they might both see the Saviour before their death. They were the first to recognise Jesus as the long-promised Messiah.

In the arms of Mary and Joseph, the infant Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi – the Lord had come to his temple, unexpectedly, suddenly --not in the form of a pillar of cloud or a pillar of

fire, as in the people's long journey to the Promised Land, but in the form of an infant; not in glory, but in humility.

In his coming, the God-with-us was revealed as being truly human, as a member of a particular human family, as a member of a particular ethnic group, but born to reveal the nature of God to all peoples, as Simeon perceived, and for which he praised God. In Jesus, God's promise to Abraham, centuries before, was also being fulfilled – one of his offspring had come as a blessing to all the nations of the earth. (Gen.22.18). Our epistle reading today is a reminder of this.

The Jewish service of dedication included a reminder of the day when Abraham was tested for his faith, by being asked to sacrifice his precious son Isaac to God. Early Christian writers saw this as a prefiguring of God's offering of his Son for the sins of humankind, as in the significant passage in the letter to the Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you. (Heb. 11.17-18)

Again, we can put ourselves into this story:

Mary and Joseph are doing for Jesus what we need to do for ourselves – they gave him to God, as we are called to give ourselves. What else does the final prayer at this service mean?

Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ our Lord. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.

We need to say this prayer often, because it is so easy to forget we belong to God, not to our family or our work or our church or our nation, but to God.

Jesus began his earthly ministry with the submission of baptism, as we are called to do. And like Mary and Joseph, we offer our own children to God in baptism, in the presence of witnesses.

Like Mary, we may also be called on to suffer in our faith, the sword that pierced her heart was to see her Son die in pain on the Cross; today in China and Syria and Pakistan and Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, whole families suffer persecution and even death for their faith.

But in the mercy of God, suffering is always overcome by joy, and we know that Mary saw Jesus again after his resurrection, although there is no record of their meeting. Why else would Mary be among the disciples in the upper room when a replacement for Judas Iscariot was chosen? (Acts 1.14) Those who suffer for their faith today will also come to experience joy.

The third name for today's feast is Candlemas, the mass of the candles. From about the 11th century, many churches began the custom of blessing the candles that would be used in services

throughout the year, on this day. Today we are blessing, not candles, but people --- commissioning our ministers, and ourselves, to be ministers of God's love to a world which sometimes seems very dark.

In the centuries before gas lighting and electric lighting, the candle was everyone's main source of light. As a joyful symbol of the light of Christ, the light of the world, it brings hope as well as light.

We have a summary record of a sermon by St Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, on this day, around the year 1100 –

Let us consider three things in the blessed Candle: the wax, the wick, and the flame. The wax which is the production of the virginal bee, is the Flesh of our Lord; the wick, which is within, is His Soul; the flame, which burns on top, is His Divinity. . . . His flesh, his . . .

So we can see a candle as a symbol of the nature of Jesus, true God and true man, and, as the Psalmist puts it, *in his light, we see light* (Ps. 36.9) We see God.

When some of us were at Sunday School, we learned a song about our calling as a candle. In case you've forgotten the words, they are in *Connections*. The song was written by the American novelist Susan Warner, and published in 1868, with music by the composer Edwin Excell, who also gave us the version of *Amazing Grace* which we still sing today.

Let's sing while seated. Thank you, Margaret --

*Jesus bids us shine
With a pure, clear light,
Like a little candle
Burning in the night.
In this world is darkness,
So let us shine--
You in your small corner,
And I in mine.*

*Jesus bids us shine,
First of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it,
If our light grows dim;*

*He looks down from heaven
To see us shine--
You in your small corner,
And I in mine.*

*Jesus bids us shine,
Then, for all around
Many kinds of darkness
In this world are found -
Sin, and want, and sorrow;
So we must shine,
You in your small corner,
And I in mine.*

That's a foretaste of what awaits us in the Seniors Hymnfest later this month. The song reminds us that Jesus taught that we can enter his kingdom only with the all-trusting love of a little child.

To sum up: the names given to today's festival have a three-fold message for us: we are called to purify ourselves before God, through the sacrifice of Christ; we are called to dedicate ourselves to him; and we are called to witness to his love and his grace in a dark world.

May God give us the faith and the submissive will to do these things – for his sake, and for ours.

For Connections 2 February

Sermon notes

Three meaningful names for today:

The feast of the Purification of St Mary the Virgin.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

Candlemas

A song for commissioned people to live by:

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