

Sunday, February 2, 2020
Presentation of Our Lord (Year A)
Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 2.22-40
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“Presentation of Our Lord . . . and of Ourselves”

It has been 40 days since we celebrated the birth of Jesus at Christmas. The Christmas decorations have long since been packed away and the tree left on the curb for pick-up or relegated to the garage until next year. The Church has celebrated the circumcision of Jesus eight days after his birth. And we have celebrated Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas, marking the coming of the magi. Thus endeth the Christmas season.

Yet, there is still one more feast day tied to Christmas. And that is today, the 40th day after Christmas—the Presentation of Our Lord. This day is significant for two reasons. The first is that according to Jewish law at the time of Jesus, a woman was considered ritually unclean for 40 days following giving birth to a child. During this time, she was not allowed near anything holy or sacred. Which means she could not participate in communal worship. But on the 40th day, she was to undergo a rite of purification which would allow her once again to return to the worshiping community. This 40th day after Christmas, Mary comes to the temple to undergo that rite of purification.

The second reason is that at some point after a month of life, a firstborn child was dedicated to God. Why is that? Aren't all children dedicated to God? We first need to understand that some Near East religions required parents to sacrifice their firstborn child to their gods who would then reward them with many healthy children. The Law imposes a similar requirement on the Jewish people: “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” (Ex 13.1-2). In describing the duties of priests—how this would be carried out—the Law provides a slightly different approach from other Near East religions: “The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which is offered to the Lord, shall be yours; but the firstborn of human beings you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. Their redemption price, reckoned from one month of age, you shall fix at five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary” (Num 18.15-16). The parents are to dedicate their firstborn to God and then provide a sacrifice which redeems the infant. In other words, the child, having been dedicated and consecrated to God, having become God's alone, is then “bought back” by the parents through payment of a sacrifice. Of course, this side of the Resurrection, we know that the infant Jesus is spared by this ancient ritual requirement, only to be offered as a sacrificial lamb 33 years later in order to redeem all of us.

This connection to Jesus' ultimate sacrifice is highlighted by the encounter between the child and the prophets Simeon and Anna. To fully appreciate what transpires with these two, we need to first go back to our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Malachi. In his time, the temple was the center of Jewish worship. But it was destroyed when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and sent the people into exile. Written after the people returned from exile and following the reconstruction and dedication of the second temple—the temple Jesus

was dedicated in—Malachi calls God’s people to restore the covenant with God and to return to true and proper worship of God in his temple. This is accompanied by the promise that God will send his messenger to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming: “Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal 3.1).

Enter Simeon. We are told in our Gospel reading that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (Lk 2.26). And on that particular day when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated the Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the temple, as well, to witness his heart’s desire. Upon seeing Jesus, Simeon immediately knows who this is. That this is the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. Simeon proclaims:

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.’ (Lk 2.29-32)

Words that we now know as the Song of Simeon, or the *Nunc Dimittis*. Simeon then tells 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.” (Lk 2.34-35). Words that may have been a bit cryptic at the time, but, again, this side of the Resurrection, an oracle that we recognize as a foretelling that Jesus would die for the salvation of the people. That this dedication of the infant Jesus is a foretaste of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The prophetess Anna then greets the Holy Family and begins “to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2.38). Her words echo those of Simeon as she offers praise to God for the child who will bring redemption to the world.

Jesus is dedicated according to the Jewish law, with the sacrifice of a couple of birds. And he is further dedicated into his destiny with the oracles of two people near death—foretelling of the salvation Jesus would bring through his own death. The Gospel tells us that for these two prophets, meeting the Messiah is the fulfillment of their life’s purpose. In a way, their purposes have a parallel meaning for Jesus. His dedication in the temple is a sacramental sign of the beginning of his own life’s purpose.

A bit of history. A bit of prophecy fulfilled. And a bit of new prophecy about what will become of Jesus. But that is not the end of the meaning behind the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Remember the purpose of Malachi’s prophecy in the first place. It was a call for the people to return to their covenant with God. To return to the temple so they would be transformed into the people God created and called them to be. Of course, Malachi did not know that a new covenant would be established through the Messiah of whom he spoke. Nor that this new covenant would be brought about through the death of the Messiah. Nor did he know the

radical nature of that new covenant—that the new covenant would bring the promise of new and eternal life; that the covenant would not only be for the Jews but would be for all people. Which brings us to us—to those who are the beneficiaries of the new covenant.

On this day on which we celebrate the purification of Mary and the dedication of Jesus, we are invited to remember our own humanness, our own brokenness, and to give thanks for the gift of redemption, the gift of salvation, that we receive through Jesus Christ. And in response to that gift, we are further invited to make our presentation. To present ourselves in God's holy temple, to seek cleansing and purification, as did Mary; to re-dedicate ourselves to God's service, as Jesus was dedicated to God's service. Just as our collect for today asks of God and states our intention: "so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Our Gospel lesson tells us that when they had fulfilled their duty to present their child in the temple, Mary and Joseph took the child and returned to their home in Nazareth. Given what Simeon said to Mary, they returned home carrying the message of God's love and the burden of their own duty to nurture, protect, and raise this special child who is the salvation of the world.

So too for us. Our presentation does not end with the dismissal at the end of the Eucharist. Rather, the dismissal is really only the beginning of our presentation. For every time we step out onto the streets of our community, by virtue of being called Christian, we present ourselves as Christ's ambassadors. We present Christ to the world, offering the hope for love and peace and healing to those needing these gifts. And we return again to this place, presenting the hurts and hopes of the world to the Church, that we might lift them up to God, presenting them to God to be sanctified and to be redeemed. And for us to discern how we are a part of that process of bearing and redeeming those hurts, of fulfilling those hopes.

Our life of faith is one of presentation. Every time we walk into this place, God's temple, we are presenting ourselves to God. We are continually re-presenting ourselves—not just for the current service or program or ministry, but also for our ongoing life and ministry in the world outside these walls. We re-present ourselves to God for his ongoing use of us to fulfill his purposes. This is a constant process of presentation and re-presentation. And through this continual offering of ourselves to God and to the world, we are indeed made the body of Christ, which, in the words of the prophet Malachi, is "the offering of Judah and Jerusalem, [the offering of St. Gregory's, that is] pleasing to the Lord."