

**Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!**

Jesus' presentation in the temple 40 days after His birth. That is what we are observing and celebrating on this festival day of the church year that used to be known as 'Candlemas.' Yes, the temple – the place where God dwelt in the midst of His people . . . the place where the priests offered up the many and various sacrifices required in the Old Testament law . . . the place where people assembled on the high religious festivals to worship with their offerings and prayers and in psalms and music of and to the Holy One of Israel, the one and true and only God . . . the place where the people heard the Word of God that was read and expounded upon by the priests.

It is, as such, not without reason that the temple plays an important and central role in the life and work of our Lord. In fact, St. Luke begins his Gospel in the temple – an angel appearing to an old priest by the name of Zechariah while he is serving in the temple to inform him that he and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, will have a son who is to be named 'John' and who will "make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

When He was 12-years old, we then hear of Jesus being left behind by Mary and Joseph when He accompanied them to the temple for the Feast of the Passover. And when they finally find Him sitting among the teachers of the law, listening to them and asking them questions, He says to them: "Why were you looking for Me? Did you not know that I must be in My Father's house?"

At the beginning of Holy Week, we hear of Jesus' entering the temple and driving out the money-exchangers and sellers of animals, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." He then spends the next two days teaching in the temple, including these words concerning the temple itself: "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." When He bows His head in death and gives up His spirit on the cross, we read that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two." 3 And then, after His ascension into heaven, St. Luke concludes his Gospel with these words while the disciples waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit in accordance with Jesus' promise: "they returned to Jerusalem and were continually in the temple blessing God."

And of all this temple-stuff in the life of Jesus, it is His presentation in the temple that sums up and gathers all that the temple was about and all that Jesus came into this world to do. And that this is no ordinary day, St. Luke the Evangelist shows us in how he reports it – more specifically, in how he quotes the Old Testament (or more correctly, in

how the Holy Spirit had Luke record it). For what Luke does is quote the Old Testament with a twist. He changes the quotation just a bit to ‘prick the ears’ of those who knew their Old Testament, so that in thinking that they were hearing something wrong; Luke reveals to them that what is happening here in the temple is not something wrong, but something completely new – God now fulfilling the Old Testament and bringing in the New.

So Luke begins: “And 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 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’).” Now, according to the Old Testament ceremonial law, every first-born male of both men and animals belonged to the Lord and were to be presented to Him. So, we read in the book of Exodus: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Consecrate to Me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine’.” And this was done as a memorial of the Exodus and the Passover, to remember when the angel of the Lord killed the firstborn of all men and animals in Egypt, but passed over and spared all the firstborn of Israel – all who were protected by the lamb’s blood on the doorposts of their houses. And that presentation or consecration is what Mary and Joseph were now doing with the infant Jesus in the temple.

But the phrase “holy to the Lord” – well, that is what is different here. That’s Luke’s twist. The expression “holy to the Lord” would make his hearers’ ears perk up, because it was not every firstborn male who was called “holy to the Lord”; but, rather, the High Priest. So, we read later in the book of Exodus concerning instructions for the high priest: “You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, ‘Holy to the Lord.’ And you shall fasten it on the front of the turban. It shall be on the priest’s forehead, that he may bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord.”

And this twist of phrase by Luke – ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’ – would cause those who knew their Old Testament to say: “Wait a minute, Luke! That’s not what it says. It says . . . OH! I get it. You’re saying: Jesus is presented in the temple as the high priest himself!” And that is precisely what we hear in today’s Epistle Reading from Hebrews: “Therefore He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.” In other words, this was no ordinary presentation of a firstborn male child! For Jesus, Mary’s firstborn son, was made like us, under the Law, so that He could be our High Priest, the Mediator between us sinners and the one holy God.

And then, Luke does it again with his next quotation: “and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons’.” To which one who was well-versed in the Old Testament would reply: “Wait, Luke! That’s not all what it says. It says, as Moses writes in Leviticus: “And when the days of her purifying are completed, she shall bring to the priest a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her. And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering.”

And when we hear that Mary and Joseph bring into the temple only a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons in order to make the required sacrifice; we naturally come to the conclusion, and rightly so, that they must have been a poor family. After all, why else would there not be a . . . OH! I get it. You’re saying, Luke, that they did bring a lamb. Mary purified in the temple with a lamb – her newborn Son Himself, the Lamb of God. So, the writer of Hebrews goes on to say in the Epistle Reading: “He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Or, as we heard John the Baptist say a few weeks ago in the Gospel Reading concerning Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” No, this was no ordinary purification! For Jesus is here in the temple to be Mary’s propitiation, to be our atoning sacrifice – the sacrificial Lamb, the one who purifies us from all sin.

And that is what St. Luke wants you to know in the subtle way in which he quotes the Old Testament here in this account of Jesus’ presentation and Mary’s purification in the temple. But just in case his ‘twists’ don’t register with us, he proceeds to give us Simeon. Yes, Simeon who, as we read, “was waiting for the consolation of Israel. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel’.” Yes, Simeon has finally seen the Christ, the Promised One, the High Priest, the Lamb of God, the Saviour of the world; and now that he has, he can die in peace.

And so can you. And that’s the point of the presentation of the 40-day old baby Jesus in the temple . . . a firstborn son, the sacrifice of a lamb, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, entrance into the Promised Land. For when, “in the fullness of time God

sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,” to use the words of St. Paul in Galatians, His plan of the salvation of not only His people Israel, but even of the Gentiles – people, yes, like you and me, has now been fulfilled. And with the coming of Jesus no other High Priest or mediator is needed. No other lamb or pigeon or dove needs to be sacrificed. In fact, the temple itself is no longer needed, for He is true temple of God, the Lamb of God, our great High Priest. And that is why, when Mary’s firstborn son dies on the cross, the curtain in the temple is torn in two, why some 30 years later the entire temple structure would be destroyed by the Roman legions. For all sin is now atoned for – including your sin. Jesus is now the once-for-all high priest, the only Mediator between us sinners and the one holy God. His blood now marks the door of our hearts, so that, like Simeon, death passes over us and is nothing to fear; but is now the gate, the door, to the Promised Land of our heavenly temple dwelling.

And when we stop to think about it, all this is really about you being presented to the Lord. Presented pure and holy through the sacrifice of the Lamb – Jesus. Presented pure and holy by our great High Priest – Jesus. Presented, like Samuel was in the Old Testament Reading, to live before the Lord in righteousness and purity forever. Oh, to be sure, right now there is still sin in us and all around us. There is still death awaiting us and others. But because of Jesus’ presentation we, like old Anna, simply wait for our presentation before the Lord in His heavenly temple by spending our days here in His earthly temple “worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day, giving thanks to God,” and then, as Anna did, also speaking of Jesus to all who are waiting for and longing for their redemption from sin and death. And it is in that faith of Anna and Simeon – faith in the words and promises of God, faith in God’s only-begotten Son and Mary’s firstborn son, faith in Him who is the sacrificial Lamb and also the Priest, that we thus pray in the words of the Candlemas hymn:

*“Jesus, by your presentation, When they blessed You, weak and poor, Make us see Your great salvation, Seal us with Your promise sure; And present us in Your glory To your Father, cleansed and pure.” Amen.*

**The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.**

Pastor Ron Bright

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