

“The Presentation in the Temple”

Luke 2:22-40

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Today is the fortieth day after Christmas, so it's time for a celebration, right? Well, it *is*, at least in some parts of Christianity. If we were Roman Catholic, or Greek Orthodox, or Anglican, we would celebrate February 2 every year with an event that is called “The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ” or “The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” or “Candlemas.” This was one of the Great Feasts of the church that the Protestant Reformers downplayed. We kept Christmas and Epiphany and Palm Sunday and Easter and Pentecost, but we got rid of most of the others. Sometimes, I think that was a mistake. This celebration is based on a biblical story that inspired many magnificent works of art, like this stained glass window from St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto. That biblical story also inspired Johann Sebastian Bach to compose not one, not two, but *three* cantatas, all of which were first performed on February 2 in three different years. For 1500 years now many Christians have been celebrating this event on February 2, forty days after Christmas. This year, we're going to join them!

The basis for this celebration is found in Luke's gospel, in the story of Mary and Joseph's visit to the temple in Jerusalem with baby Jesus. Luke says: “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.” Luke is referring to a set of laws back in the Old Testament, in Leviticus 12. Basically, the law said that any Israelite woman who gave birth to a son had to go through a forty-day period of purification following the baby's birth. At the end of the forty days, she was to go to the temple, bringing with her an offering of two animals. Wealthy people would bring a lamb that was a year old and either a dove or a pigeon; poor people were allowed to just bring a pair of doves or a pair of pigeons. The mother would take these animals to the priest in the temple, and he would then sacrifice them on the holy altar. That made atonement for her; it had the ritual effect of rendering her “clean” after her flow of blood.

Mary and Joseph show up in Jerusalem, forty days after Jesus' birth, to perform this ritual. The fact that they did this is significant for several reasons. First, it means that Mary was dutifully following all the traditional Jewish customs and rituals. Just because she had given birth to the Savior of the world did not exclude her from needing to do what every other faithful Jewish mother would do. Second, the fact that Joseph accompanies her is significant. This was *Mary's* ritual; it was *Mary* who needed to be cleansed. There was no law requiring Joseph to attend. He wasn't even the father of the child! The fact that he made this trek with Mary demonstrates his commitment to her, and to her child. He could have just said, “This is *your* problem, not mine,” and made her find her own way there. But he doesn't do

that. He is, after all, a *righteous* man, as Matthew tells us. Here we see that righteousness in action. Finally, this story demonstrates clearly that Mary and Joseph were not wealthy. They had no lamb to offer. The holy family, perhaps *the* most *famous* family the world has ever seen, was poor.

So you can see why the Christian festival is sometimes called “The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary” – for it commemorates the event that purified Mary after Jesus was born – and why it is sometimes called “The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ” – for it recalls to mind the day when Jesus was brought to the temple in Jerusalem for the very first time. Jesus, of course, would return to the temple numerous times throughout his life, including that triumphal entry on Palm Sunday some 30 years later, but *that* visit – when he was only forty days old – was his *first*.

Now a couple things happen to Mary and Joseph when they show up in the temple with baby Jesus. First, they meet a man named Simeon. Luke says that Simeon was “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” We know nothing about Simeon other than what Luke says about him. Did he live in Jerusalem, or was he just visiting? How old, exactly, was he? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit “rested” on him? All those questions have given rise to a variety of different legends. Some people think that Simeon was the priest who performed the purification ritual for Mary. Some think Simeon had been one of the Jews who translated the scriptures from Hebrew into Greek, about 200 years earlier, which would make Simeon remarkably long-lived. All of that is conjecture; however, it is very likely that Simeon was well-acquainted with the scriptures. He knew well the prophecies about the Messiah who was to come.

“Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.” In the stained glass window from St. Michael’s Cathedral, that’s Simeon in the center, holding baby Jesus. Mary and Joseph are on the left. Here’s another depiction, this one by the 17th-century painter Rembrandt. Here’s a closer view. That’s Simeon, holding Jesus; Mary is in the middle, wearing blue; Joseph is the man just to the left of Mary, somewhat in the shadows. If you look closely you can see the two pigeons in Joseph’s right hand. The tall man in the flowing robes would be the priest.

Simeon launches into a prayer as he cradles the holy infant in his arms. “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.” These prophetic words have been set to music time and time again, you may have seen tunes called “Nunc dimittis,” which are the first two words of Simeon’s prayer in Latin. They are used in services of evening prayer, and they even inspired T. S. Eliot to write a poem based on his words!

Simeon then turns to Mary and Joseph, who are amazed by the words coming from Simeon’s mouth. This is not the first time complete strangers have approached them because of the significance of this babe; shepherds and magi had come to visit him when he was born; now, this elderly man in Jerusalem reveals that he, too, has been given special revelation about this babe. “This child,” he tells them, “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.” Simeon know that when this child grows, people will have a choice to make. Is he, or is he not, the Son of God; is he, or is he not, God’s holy Messiah? Those who choose rightly will rise; those who choose wrongly will fall. Some people will outright oppose him. Simeon is prophesying, in broad strokes, the contours of Jesus’ ministry – and his death. Simeon knows that something tragic is going to happen, that is going to cause immense pain for his mother Mary. Does Simeon know that Jesus will die a gruesome death on a cross? And does he know of what will come after – his victorious resurrection from the grave? I also wonder what Mary thought about Simeon’s words. Did she have *any* idea what was to come?

Then, Mary and Joseph meet a woman named Anna. Luke says she was “a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with prayer and fasting each day.” Here’s the window from St. Michael’s Cathedral again; Anna is on the right. Like Simeon, we know nothing else about her, beyond what Luke tells us. Nor do we know anything else about her father. She lived a quiet life in the temple, singing songs like the Psalms we read earlier. She was a widow, and a prophet. Not the first female prophet in the Bible – there were five female prophets in the Old Testament – nor will she be the last. God did not just give revelations to *men*. Women like Anna received them too. She *knew* who this baby was. She “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Mary and Joseph had gone to Jerusalem simply to fulfill a traditional ritual. They were not expecting this – these two encounters with those two wizened, elderly Jews who *knew* who Jesus was. They returned home to Nazareth, no doubt pondering – once again – the significance of this babe.

In both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church, Anna and Simeon are official saints. Some consider them the last prophets of the Old Testament, the last ones that pointed forward to Jesus.

From the early days of the church, Christians have commemorated the events of that day with joy. In the fourth century, a pilgrim to Jerusalem wrote that “the Feast of the Purification is celebrated with the greatest honor.... All go in procession, and all things are done in order with great joy, just as at Easter. All the priests preach, and also the bishop, always treating of that passage in the Gospel where, on the fortieth day, Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the temple.” Imagine hearing not just *one* sermon about this passage, but *many*! Over time, candles became part of the procession – remember that Simeon said that Jesus is “a light for revelation” – and families started bringing candles from home, to be blessed. Eventually, this celebration came to be called *Candle-mass*, or just “Candlemas.”

But the basic point of the day has never changed. This is one of the significant moments in the life of Christ: his first public appearance, accompanied by the prophetic words from Simeon and Anna. If Mary and Joseph had any intention of trying to pretend their baby was nothing special, that he was as ordinary as the next child – well, *that* was going to be impossible. *God* was telling people about Jesus. First the shepherds, then the magi, now Simeon and Anna. The great news of God’s Savior would not be contained. The Messiah was *here*, in the world, live and in the flesh. God’s redemption had *arrived*.

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