

Presentation of Our Lord + 2 February 2025 + Mal 3:1-4 + Heb 2:14-18 + Lk 2:22-40

Today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus in the Temple. Some of these ancient Jewish rituals might seem a little odd to us being so far removed from their original contexts. But the Presentation is incredibly important to salvation history. So let's look at 3 important aspects of this event: *purification, consecration, and glorification*.

To begin, the importance of *purification*. According to the Law of Moses, a mother was considered ritually unclean after giving birth to a male child, and so she had to make an offering for her impurity 40 days after childbirth (which, by the way, is why we celebrate this feast 40 days after Christmas). As we said, the purity laws of the Old Covenant may seem strange today, and we don't have time to consider why they came about in the first place, but in this case they most likely had to do with proximity to blood in an ancient society without any sense of modern medicine. Even more, such 'impurity' here had nothing to do with any moral fault. After all, God had promised to multiply the People of Israel, so a mother giving birth to a child was in no way looked down upon. Theologically, Mary's actions are history-changing: all of the purification Laws of the Old Covenant will become obsolete when her son Jesus begins the *purification* of the whole world.

And this brings us to the 2nd aspect of the Presentation: *consecration*. According to the Law of Moses, every first-born male was to be *consecrated* to the Lord in the Temple, most likely for priestly service. Parents would present, then immediately "redeem", or we might say, "buy back" their child from the Lord by an offering. This too may seem odd to us, but this "handing over" of firstborn sons was to remind the People of Israel of how God spared their firstborn sons from death in Egypt. And yet in our Gospel today, there is a big change from the norm: Mary and Joseph present Jesus to the Lord in the Temple, but they do not redeem Him. There is something very special about this child, which will become clear as the life of Jesus unfolds: He needs no redemption, for He Himself will become the world's *Redeemer*.

So this means that from His very infancy, Jesus is *consecrated*, or *offered* for priestly service to the Father. Roughly 33 years later, Jesus will offer Himself again; not in the Temple, but in the Upper Room of the Last Supper, and on the Cross. If we put this all together, we find that Jesus is truly a priest—a man who offers sacrifice on behalf of the people for their sins, but in a new, revolutionary way. As our 2nd reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus became *a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people*. Jesus can *expiate*, or 'atone for' sins, because He offered not bulls or goats, but Himself. It's not as if God wanted all of those animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant. They were given to remind people of the effects of sin, and their need for mercy; but they could never achieve true forgiveness, true atonement. Only the one who represents both God—the Holy one; and man—the offender—could do that; could *redeem* us from the grip of sin and death.

And this is why Christ's sacrifice pleased the Father: not because He died a violent death on the Cross—after all, God the Father is not a monster. But rather because the Son loves us *and* the Father so much that He was perfectly obedient to the will of the Father. And the Father's will was our salvation. And once again, this offering, this sacrifice, of Jesus, will also render the whole Old Covenant system of priest, sacrifice, and Temple obsolete.

So now, the 3rd aspect of the Presentation. Today's feast is also known as "Candlemas," on account of the old tradition of blessing candles at this Mass. And we do this because of Simeon's prophecy to the Blessed Mother that her Son would be *a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for [God's] people Israel*. So what's that all about? Well, in the book of the Prophet Ezekiel, there is a vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple on account of the people's sins. This prophecy was probably made just before the Temple was destroyed, and the People went into exile in Babylon. But later on in the book of Ezekiel, the Prophet has another vision of the glory of God someday returning to the Temple, and God remaining in the midst of the children of Israel forever. This is very similar to the vision of Malachi in our 1st reading today, of God's messenger finally returning to the Temple, purifying the people and making their sacrifices acceptable.

And yet, this remained an unfulfilled hope at the time of Christ. Yes, the Temple had been rebuilt, but it wasn't the same as before the exile. It was still the holy place of Israel, but God's glory wasn't there. But all that changed when Jesus is presented in the Temple by Mary and Joseph. God's messenger has finally come, and God's glory has returned! But not as expected. That is, only about 70 years later, the Romans would again destroy the Temple. It has never been rebuilt, because it is no longer needed. The new Temple, the new 'residence' of God's Glory, which shines on all of us, is the resurrected body of Christ.

So, there's a lot there. So much so, some may wonder: *is it all true?* Well yes it is true, and we have two impartial witnesses: the elderly Simeon & Anna. Through the Spirit, Simeon recognizes that this little child is God's *salvation* and His returned *glory*. But Simeon also foretells that this child's mission to save all humanity—Jews & Gentiles alike—will not be accomplished without great suffering: both for this child, and even for His Mother.

And this suffering has great meaning for us too. As our 2nd reading says: *because [Jesus] himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested*. Jesus is not only our *merciful and faithful high priest* and *the King of Glory*, but He also *knows* our suffering. He knows it not just because He is God, but also because He has lived it. The Letter to the Hebrews will go on say that *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin*. Then the author concludes: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (4:15-16).