

Purification - 2020

I take as my text today, from St. Luke' Gospel:

And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

There is so little recorded in the Gospels concerning the birth and childhood of Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke have provided snippets, that are lovely in themselves but leave us with so many questions about the early years of our Lord.

As may be expected this snippet from St. Luke, following closely on his narrative of the Birth of our Lord, a narrative which compresses a larger timeframe, is marvelous, and provides us with much to think about.

Moreover, from an orthodox Christian standpoint, the passage also opens up the opportunity to look more closely at the relationship of the **Virgin Mary** to the *Doctrine of the Incarnation*, and at her pre-eminence among the Saints of the Church.

Though one's attention is first drawn to the *Purification of the Virgin Mary*, our focus really should be on the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple*.

Let us first look briefly at the three aspects of the *Mosaic Law* alluded to in this passage, and in a preceding verse: the *Circumcision*, the *Redemption of the First Born*, and the *Purification after Childbirth*; afterwards we can put into perspective the entire passage we read today from St. Luke's Gospel.

You will recall that we celebrated the *Circumcision of Christ* on New Year's Day. Circumcision of every Jewish boy was required on the eighth day after his birth. It was of such importance that it could be performed even on the Sabbath. And it was the day on which the child received his name.

In our Gospel passage today, reflecting the passing of about 40 days since His Birth, St. Luke tells us that Jesus was brought to the Temple and presented to the Lord. This requirement under the Law goes back to the Book of Exodus, where we are told that every first-born male, whether human or animal, was sacred to God and, thus, must be offered up to the Lord.

Perhaps, in this requirement, there is a lingering of the ancient practice of sacrificing the first-born to god — god with a little “g” — among the pagan religious rituals in which children were sacrificed, and among whom the Hebrews had lived.

Some speculate, also, that it could have been a recognition of the power and graciousness of God in bringing forth human life.

At any rate, the Jewish custom under the Law was that the first-born male child was to be presented to God in the Temple. Associated with the presentation was a redemption ceremony, where the child could be bought back from God by the parents.

This ceremony is depicted in the Book of Numbers as the ***Redemption of the First-born***. For a sum of money paid to the priests in the Temple, a sum in that day of five shekels, or about a month's pay, the parents could buy back their son.

Finally, there is the ***Purification after Childbirth***.

In the Book of Leviticus, we find that a woman could not enter the Temple, or participate in any religious ceremony, until after her purification. The purification required a lamb and a young pigeon for a burnt offering. However, if the family could not afford a lamb, there was provision for the substitution of two young pigeons.

This purification ceremony was to take place forty days after the birth of a male child, or 80 days after the birth of a female child. During the time before purification, the woman was unclean, thus the prohibition from entering the Temple, or sharing in any religious ceremony, though she could go about her household chores and everyday business.

What ties these ceremonies together is the conviction that a child was a gift of God for which we are answerable; indeed, according to the stoics, a child was only lent to his parents, not given.

Then, appear, in St. Luke's narrative, **Simeon** and **Anna**, representative of the pious and devout Israelites who waited for the redemption of God's people as foretold by the prophets, and revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

They, Simeon and Anna, foresee the ***stumbling stone*** of many of the Jewish people who are looking for a different kind of **Messiah** and who shall deny the true **Messiah**, as Simeon says that even the **Mother of Jesus** will suffer a ***piercing sword*** of doubt.

From the words of Simeon, we have one of the great and precious hymns of the **Church**, the *Nunc Dimittis*, especially familiar to those who read the *Daily Office of Evening Prayer*.

In all this, we see the fulfilling of the Law, and it was St. Paul who grasped the significance, asserting that Jesus Christ was *born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those under the law*.

Although there has often been a close association of this feast of the **Church** with the **Virgin Mary**, when taken in a greater context, the focus is on our Lord and Saviour, and the fulfilling of the Law. The revisers of the Prayer Book in 1662 refocused our attention on this aspect of the Messiahship when they added *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, bringing this celebration into greater conformity with ancient tradition.

While this is an opportune time to address in fullness the role of the **Virgin Mary** in the *Incarnation*, and her defining influence on the **Church** through the ages, there is not ample time in the context of a short homily; suffice it to say here that her position in the redemptive process is understated by some segments of the **Church**, and over-stated by others.

For the moment, it is enough to say that **Mary** was chosen by God to be the vessel through which He would enter the world, and reconcile mankind to Himself. That alone places the **Virgin Mary** in highest esteem, sets her apart in the world, and establishes a relationship with God and man that defies human reason.

For now, we have before us the witness of these two to the *Messiahship* of Jesus: **Simeon** and **Anna**, both who blessed the parents of their Messiah in an expression of love and respect, and a thanksgiving for this wonderful moment they had long awaited and were promised.

In a sense, they were witnesses to the first offering up of the Son of God to his Father, the other offering being accomplished on the ***Cross at Calvary***, when Jesus gave Himself up in an act of love for the redemption of the whole world.

Now, if you can have a post-script to a sermon, for this one, it would be this:

As Christians, we oftentimes forget that we are who we are; we are Christians, no longer Gentiles, or Jews; no longer Greeks or Romans, or pagans, or any other thing; we are who we are through the absolute faith and trust of one person: **Mary, the Mother of Jesus.**

We are Christians, and, as such, we owe so much to that one human being, human in all sense of the word, the **Virgin Mary**, who, when approached by the **Angel Gabriel**, accepted with unflinching faith the calling of being the mother of the ***Saviour of the World.***

While we celebrate today the offering of the Son of God to His Father in the custom of the ***Mosaic Law***, we are also mindful that, in the background, a loving mother herself fulfilled the **Law**, a vessel already cleansed by the ***Love*** and ***Grace*** of God, within which the Son of God took upon Himself our flesh through the flesh of the **Virgin Mary.**

Our focus is on Jesus Christ. He is the object of our love and our devotion. He is our very life, for it is He through Whom all creation was made, is sustained, and has been redeemed.

We accept and revere the **Apostles**, who received the **Faith** once and for all delivered to them by our Lord, and rightfully so. We remember with honor, and even devotion, the **Saints** who carried the Gospel throughout the world, often at the cost of their lives.

But, it is in the shadows that we find the **Virgin Mary**, who gave through her womb our Lord His humanity, and who maternally nurtured Him, and who, as decreed by our early **Church Fathers**, is worthy to be called **Theotokos, Mother of God**.

Theotokos — a Greek word that roughly translates to **God-bearer** or **Mother of God** — conforms to the *Doctrine of the Trinity* in that we affirm in the **Apostles** and **Nicene Creeds**, that Jesus Christ *is God Incarnate*.

Thus, in all its complexity, **Christianity** comes down to one word: **Love**.

It is through the **Love** of God that he sent his Son into the world; it is through God's **Love** that the world and all creation is sustained; and it is through **Love** that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a young Jewish maiden, therein taking upon Himself our humanity.

Love: the Essence and eternal Nature of God.

Imagine: in the Temple that day, **Mary** presents her son to God — God's Son to His father — and redeems in the Jewish custom, under the Law, the *Redeemer of the World*. God in his **Divine Love** entrusts his Son to the **Virgin Mary** who remained **His Loving Mother**, even at the foot of the **Cross**, a love that is eternal.