

The Presentation of the Lord

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Malachi 3:1-4
<i>Response</i>	Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 24:1, 4, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 2:14-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[A] light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:22-40 or Luke 2:22-32

Every year on February 2nd, the Church celebrates an ancient feast known today as the feast of the Presentation of the Lord. It's the feast where we celebrate and remember the famous episode of Jesus being presented in the temple when He was a baby by Joseph and Mary. Now in ancient times, the feast was actually known as the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we'll look at why it was called that in a second. It had a few different names—the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary is one. Another traditional name of the feast in the west is Candlemas, the Mass of candles, because it was at this feast (as we'll see) historically that they developed the custom of a solemn blessing of candles that would symbolize the light of the world that is coming into the world through Christ and His birth, and His being presented in the Jerusalem temple.

So the Gospel for today, as you might expect, given its the feast of the Presentation, is going to be an account of the presentation. And that is found only in the Gospel of Luke 2. So this is one of those episodes from Jesus' infancy where we only know about it through one Gospel. It's through the Gospel of Luke 2:22-40. So it's kind of a long account, but it's a very important episode. Obviously, Luke, just in composing the Gospel, thought it was important enough to devote this much space to it. So we'll read through the Gospel in its entirety, and

then we're going to back it up and unpack it and try to see what's going on in this episode. So it says this...Luke 2:22:

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 that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came 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 lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word;
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to thy people Israel."

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,

"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel,
and for a sign that is spoken against
(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also),
that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phan'u-el, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.¹

That's a long Gospel for today, but it is obviously an ancient feast and a very important feast, even though it may not play as big a role in contemporary culture as say Christmas or Easter or some of the other festivals. So let's look at this feast, try to figure out what's going on here in this Gospel.

The first point I would make is...you'll notice as I mentioned earlier, in ancient times, this feast was called the feast of the Purification of Mary. And the reason it's called that is because of the first verse here. It says "when the time for the purification according to the law of Moses had come"...the Greek word there, *katharismos*, just means "purification." And that's an allusion to the book of Leviticus chapter 12, which describes the purification of a woman that would take place 40 days after the birth of her son after childbirth.

Now, first point I want to make here...this is so important. This is not the account of Jesus' circumcision. It's very important. These two—whatever reason, Christians tend to conflate those two events here—the presentation in the temple and the circumcision in the temple. The circumcision of Jesus happens on the eighth day after His birth. That was the law of Moses going all the way back to Genesis 17. So when a little boy would be born, if his parents were devout, law-abiding Jews, he would be circumcised eight days after he was born. So we actually would celebrate that during the Octave of Christmas. It's one reason we have an octave for Christmas. It's not as clear to Catholics nowadays, because the ancient feast of the Circumcision of Jesus—which used to be celebrated on that eighth day—has now been superseded by the feast of Mary, Mother of God...so January 1st.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So we still read the account of His circumcision, but we often don't think about the feast as the feast of His circumcision. So what sometimes happens is people think, "Well, they're bringing Him up to the temple...must be the same thing." But it's not the same thing, because actually, you can be circumcised in the synagogue. You can be circumcised outside of Jerusalem. But the Presentation in the temple here is something that can only happen in Jerusalem, where there is the temple—the dwelling place of God.

So this is not taking place eight days after Jesus' birth; it's taking place 40 days after. And in the book of Leviticus, that 40-day period was a time where a woman would be purified. Well, you might be thinking, "Purified from what?" Well, if you recall, in the Old Testament, there were certain acts of ritual purity and ritual impurity that could exclude a person from participation in the temple. So one of those acts, for example, was the loss of blood. So when a woman would have her menstrual cycle, she would not be able to go into the temple. Not because there was anything morally wrong with menstruation, but because the loss of blood rendered one ritually impure. Just as when husband and wife would have marital relations, that would also render you impure, and you would have to wait a certain period of time before returning to the temple. Because the temple was considered a sacred space. No blood loss, no loss of seed or blood, could be brought into the sacred place, the sacred space of the temple. So this is part of the ritual purity laws of the Old Testament.

And if you recall, not only is Jesus a Jew (as I'm always saying), but Mary was Jewish, and Joseph was Jewish as well. So it's really important to remember that. So what we have here is a picture of Mary and Joseph being obedient to the Jewish Torah. They're waiting the 40-day period that would be the ordinary waiting period before a woman could reenter the temple and go in after worship. So 40 days later, she enters the temple after that time of purification has ended. And they also bring a sacrifice up to the temple to be offered in the temple.

Now in this case, it's interesting, because Luke says here that he describes the sacrifice that they're offering as "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24). Now the reason that's interesting is because in the book of

Leviticus chapter 12 when it's describing the purification of a mother after childbirth, it actually says that she is to go and offer a lamb. But if she can't offer a lamb—if she can't afford a lamb—she can offer a sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons. So this is the one piece of evidence that we have from the New Testament that shows us that the Holy Family was poor. This is where we get the tradition of the poverty of Joseph and Mary from. They didn't even have enough money to pay for a lamb. They had to pay for a very inexpensive sacrifice of the two turtledoves. So there's an irony here, too, if you think about the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is the long awaited king of Israel. He's the one that Gabriel said is going to sit on the throne of David...and his parents can't even afford a sheep, a baby sheep, to offer as a sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. So there's both royal dignity of Jesus...but also the extreme poverty of the Holy Family being juxtaposed here.

Now in that context, Simeon steps onto the scene. And it says here that he was a prophet, basically. He was a righteous man, he was a devout man and that he was waiting for “the consolation of Israel”...consolation of Israel. Now I think most of us probably just blow right past that verse. The consolation of Israel...okay, that must mean some kind of age of salvation or something like that. But that language is evocative of a very specific prophecy in the Old Testament. It's a prophecy of Isaiah and of a new exodus where God would come and save His people again in the way that He had saved them in the first exodus. So let me just read the words there to you. This is from Isaiah chapter 40. It's a very famous prophecy. It says this:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Now if you keep going down, and you skip down to verse 9, it says this:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good [news]

Sometimes translations have this “good tidings,” but it’s literally “good news.” It’s the exact same language you find in the New Testament when Jesus comes onto the scene and starts proclaiming the Good News, the *euaggelion*, the Gospel. So:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good [news];
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good [news],
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord God comes... (Isaiah 40:9-10a)

So, what’s Isaiah’s prophecy of the consolation of Israel? The comfort...they say “comfort my people”—comfort to Jerusalem. The consolation of Jerusalem and the consolation of Israel is the coming of God. It’s the Good News that God is coming to forgive His people’s sins and to set them free. So, Simeon...that’s what he’s waiting for. He’s waiting for the consolation of Israel, but he’s waiting for the coming of God to do it. And so, if you go back to Luke here, when he encounters this baby...

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death...

...until he had set his eyes on the Lord’s Messiah. He’s filled with the Holy Spirit, he takes the child up in his arms, and he blesses God and says, “Now you can let me go. You can let me depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared...

...in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.” (Luke 2:31b-32)

This is a very famous hymn. In Latin, it's known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, which just means "now allow"—allow your servant to depart in peace. And for those of you out there who pray the Liturgy of the Hours, you know this prayer very well, because every night at Night Prayer, you say the *Nunc Dimittis*. You say the prayer of Simeon. And the reason the Church has that prayer there every night is both rejoicing in the salvation of Christ, but it's also a prayer of preparation for death. So in the same way as going to sleep every night is a kind of little foretaste of death and waking up every morning is a little foretaste of the resurrection, the Church gives us the prayer of Simeon in the face of Christ, where he says, "I can depart in peace now, Lord. I've seen the light of salvation that you've given me in Christ Jesus." So this is a very important hymn in the life of the Church, and it goes all the way back to Simeon, who rejoices in the light of Christ, the light of salvation.

You'll notice that it says here—I love this—that Jesus's mother and father, Mary and Joseph "marveled at what was said about him." So you can see they're kind of surprised by this, not because they haven't seen other extraordinary things, but...I can imagine if I was a dad bringing my little baby up to the temple to perform this ritual, and some old dude grabs him out of my arms and lifts him up and makes this prophetic declaration, it would be amazing. It's startling, right? They clearly are surprised at Simeon's utterance. And yet at the same time, it is prophetic. And so in that context, while they are still marveling at what he said, now Simeon turns to Mary and addresses another prophecy that specifically regards her and the child. And so when he says here is:

...this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against...

So notice, the first half of his prophecy is focused on the glory and the salvation and the revelation. This prophecy is focused on the cross. It's focused on the division that's going to take place. He's set for the fall and the rise of many in Israel. "Destined to be a sign of contradiction" is a traditional translation. In other words, "a sign to be spoken against." So although it is a pronouncement of glory, there's no glory apart from the cross in the life of Jesus, and that's what Simeon is

saying to Mary. And he utters here these very mysterious words, “a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

So the cross isn't just going to (in a sense) result in the death of Jesus. He will die physically. He's going to be executed physically. But Mary is going to undergo an interior martyrdom. She's going to die spiritually, so to speak, in her soul at the pain that she'll experience in witnessing the death of Jesus. I bring that up because this is the biblical foundation for one of the traditional titles of Mary as “Queen of the Martyrs.” And you might think, “Well, why is she the queen of the martyrs when she was assumed into Heaven at the end of her life? She wasn't martyred.” The Church has always held that Mary's interior martyrdom takes place at Calvary. So she merits through Calvary the title of Queen of the Martyrs. And we see here Simeon articulating that with this mysterious image of the sword piercing her soul. The sword pierces your body, you die. If it pierces your soul, what does that do? That's how he's describing the cross.

Now he's not the only one here to prophesy. There's also Anna, the daughter of Phan'u-el, who is a prophetess. Now this is very interesting. Notice Simeon is a prophet, and Anna is a prophetess. Sometimes people will say things about Judaism in the first century with regard to men and women's roles that aren't accurate. Now sometimes people will say, “Well, only men had leadership roles in ancient Israel.” And that is true when it comes to things like the priesthood. Only men were priests. But in the Old Testament—as well as the New Testament—there are also men and women who are prophets and prophetesses, so the office of prophet is not something that was restricted to men alone. You have prophetesses in the Old Testament. Deborah is the most famous example of this. You could also describe Jael as a kind of prophetess...Judith...because they also utter these words that are inspired by God, these hymns of praise. Miriam, Moses' sister, prophesies after they cross through the waters of the Red Sea.

So there's always a notion of women prophets, and Anna is like a New Covenant example of that. And in this case, you'll notice she was a married woman, but she was a widow. Her husband had died. And apparently, she took up a life of radical asceticism, living in the temple and fasting and praying night and day. That was just her...her entire life was consecrated to prayer and fasting—the little example

here of consecrated religious life being part of Judaism before it was part of Christianity. We'll actually see very early in the Church there will be an order of widows—women whose husbands have died, who devote themselves entirely to lives of prayer and fasting and almsgiving as a kind of anticipation of the later institution of consecrated religious life.

In any case, Anna here is a consecrated widow. She's in the temple all day long, praying and praying. I'm sure those of you priests out there, you know you have women just like that in your parish who, especially the widows, who are absolutely dedicated to the life of the parish, the life of the Church, and who play a very key role in the spiritual health and the spiritual well being of the Church through their prayers. And in this case, she comes up at the same hour and gives thanks to God as she recognizes Jesus. Unfortunately, we don't have her words here, but it says that she:

...spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And there's another allusion to Isaiah 40. Remember it said that Jerusalem's time was ended, and her iniquities were pardoned. So Luke loves to do this in his Gospel, to give us a male figure and a female figure. He gives us pairs. And in this case, the pair of Simeon and Anna, the prophet and the prophetess, both together bear witness to the fact that in Christ in the infant Jesus, the light of salvation has dawned on the world...and that the coming of God that Isaiah talked about is now being fulfilled.

Okay, so with that in mind, let's go back to the Old Testament. How does any of this relate to the Old Testament for today? Well, if you turn here...the Old Testament reading for today is from the book of the prophet Malachi, which is one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, and therefore, one of many people's favorite books in the Old Testament. Because it's nice and short. It's also the last of the 12 prophets, and it has a very important prophecy. In Malachi chapter 3, verses 1-4, it talks about how in the future, before the day of judgement, the Lord Himself is going to come to the temple. Listen to what it says, chapter 3, verse 1:

“Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. (Malachi 3:1-4)

So what’s going on here? It’s describing the coming here...notice, does it say anything about the coming of the Messiah? No. Does it say anything about the coming of a king? No. What does it describe? The coming of the Lord Himself to His temple. And the Hebrew word there for Lord is the tetragrammaton, those four sacred letters—*Yhwh*—the sacred unpronounceable name of God. So what it’s saying here is that in the future God Himself will come to the temple in Jerusalem. At the time of salvation, God’s going to visit His people by visiting the temple. And obviously, when you juxtapose that with the Gospel reading today, what are we celebrating on the feast of the Presentation of the Lord? We’re celebrating the fulfillment of the prophecy of God Himself coming to the temple in Jerusalem.

Because remember, up to this point, that hasn’t happened yet. He’s conceived in Nazareth. He’s born in Bethlehem. But this is His first time that He comes into the temple. Now in a Jewish setting, it’s hard for me to describe for you just how momentous this would be, because in first century Judaism, they were familiar with the book of Ezekiel. Most contemporary readers—Christian readers—aren’t, but they were. And in the book of Ezekiel, it talks about the fact that when the temple was destroyed in 587 BC, before the Babylonians came to destroy the temple, it says that the presence of the Lord departed from the temple.

If you recall in the time of Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 8, and Solomon builds the temple, there’s the great glory cloud that comes down into the temple as a sign of God’s presence. Well, according to Ezekiel, the glory of the Lord departs from the

temple before it's destroyed, and then it's wiped off the face of the Earth. They tear it...the Babylonians come and they burn it to the ground. Now the temple gets rebuilt after the Babylonian Exile. But what does not return in the second temple is the glory cloud. That's the symbol of God's presence—the visible sign of God's presence.

So they're still waiting for God to come to His temple. So when Mary and Joseph—in obedience to the law of Moses—bring the baby Jesus up to the temple, they thereby fulfill the prophecy of the consolation of Jerusalem, the redemption of Jerusalem, and the coming of the Lord to the temple. And so it's beautiful here, the psalm the Church chooses for today is a very famous psalm that's all about God coming to the temple. The psalm for today is Psalm 24, and listen to what it says here. At the end of the psalm, it's actually describing people who seek the face of the god of Jacob—people who want to go to the temple, who want to stand in the holy place. And this is what it says at the end of the psalm, verse 7. Psalm 24, verse 7:

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is the King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

So notice what's being described here—it's the doors to the city or the gates to the temple. Because remember, the temple was open and shut by...they had these massive gates that would allow people in. And the priests actually had basically charge of opening up the gates and closing the gates. And so what's described here is the gates are being opened here not for pilgrims to come in but for the Lord

Himself to come in His holy place—to come into the mountain of the Lord, to come into the city of Jerusalem, to come to the house of the Lord in the temple.

But how does He come to the city? How does He come to His house? As a little baby. As an infant. The humble child of two humble, poor parents who can't even afford to buy a lamb. They have to get the sacrifice of the poor, the sacrifice of the destitute, the sacrifice of the turtledove.

So in closing then, what we're celebrating on the feast of the Presentation is the coming of God to Earth. But once again, not in the Nativity of Jesus but in the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem in His Presentation. And so I'll close here with a quote from the Venerable Bede. St. Bede is...in the 8th century, he was one of the few doctors of the Church who came from the British Isles. He was from Northumbria. He's one of my favorite early medieval writers. He's considered kind of the end of the Patristic Age and the beginning of the Middle Ages. And already in the 8th century, the feast—this feast day that we're celebrating—was being celebrated throughout the Church. It was already an ancient and venerable feast. And so this is what Bede says about the feast of the Presentation:

[T]he solemnity we celebrate today... is dedicated especially to the humility of our Lord and Savior, along with that of his inviolate mother. [The reading] explains that they owed nothing to the law made themselves subject to the fulfillment of its legal decrees in everything... [A]s our Lord and Savior, who in his divinity was the one who gave the law, when he appeared as a human being, willed to be “under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law...” –so too his blessed mother, who by a singular privilege was above the law, nevertheless did not shun being made subject to the principles of the law for the sake of showing [us] an example of humility...²

That's from Bede's *Homilies on the Gospels*—Homily number 1, section 18. Beautiful. So what Bede's saying here is that the moral teaching of the feast of the Presentation is the humility of Jesus and the humility of Mary. Because the reality

² Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels* 1.18; trans. L. T. Marin and D. Hurst, OSB, p. 179-80

is, neither one of them needed to be purified of any sin, and neither one of them needed to offer any sacrifice of atonement. But in obedience and humility—in obedience to the law of Moses—Mary fulfills that legal duty. And in doing so, in her humility, also fulfills the prophecy...that the Lord would one day come to His temple and that He would be a light to the Gentiles.

And so on this day, on this day of Candle Mass—Candlemas—we celebrate the coming of the light of the world into the world through the solemn procession and the blessing of holy candles that remind us that this little baby Jesus is indeed a light of the world.