

The Presentation of the Lord

(Years A, B and C)

<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

On February 2nd, the Church celebrates the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the temple—the famous bringing of the infant Jesus to the temple to offer sacrifice for Him by Mary and Joseph. The second reading for today is taken from the letter to the Hebrews. And in this case, it might be a little unclear at first how it connects with the Presentation, so let's read it through, and then I'll try to unpack why this reading is chosen for this particular feast day. It says this in Hebrews 2: 14-18:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.¹

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, what is this from? What's the context here, and why is it relevant to the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple? The first question...this is from the second chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, and this very famous letter is really all about Christ and the temple. So one of the reasons it makes sense to pull a passage from Hebrews for today is because the Presentation of the Lord is the day we celebrate the coming of God to the temple in Jerusalem—which is the house of God on Earth—in the Presentation of the infant Christ in the temple. And so it's fitting that we would take a passage from Hebrews.

And in context here, the opening chapters of Hebrews are about establishing the fact that not only is Christ the Son of God, but He is the true high priest of the new and everlasting covenant. And in this case, what it's saying here is that Christ partook, as priest, of the human nature—of the same nature as all other human beings—so that through His death He might destroy the one who has the power of death (that's the devil) and deliver all of his brethren, all of His fellow human beings...

...who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. (Hebrews 2:15b)

And you'll notice here that verse...it says:

...surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. (Hebrews 2:16)

And you might be thinking, "What is that all about?" Well, because apparently—in the community to which the letter of the Hebrews is written—there were some people who were confusing Jesus with an angel. Some people were saying that Christ—as the messenger of the Lord—was in fact one of the other messengers of the Lord. He was just one of the angels. He wasn't God made flesh become fully human, but He was just one of (or the highest) of the angels. You still actually see that idea running around today in certain circles—so for example, amongst the Jehovah's Witnesses. In standard or common doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, they contend that Jesus is not the eternal uncreated Son of God made man, but

rather, He is a creature. And He is the angelic Son of God. He is the highest of the angels. In fact, many of them identify Him with St. Michael.

Now that might sound bizarre to a lot of Catholics, but it's actually a very ancient error, because if you go back to the Old Testament, one of the first names for the angels in the Old Testament is sons of God. You'll see this in the book of Job, for example, and elsewhere. So the expression "son of God" in the Old Testament could refer to angels. It could refer to the king of Israel. And it could refer to the people of Israel as a whole. So it was kind of an ambiguous term.

So when people come and begin proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God, some Hebrew Christians—or some Hebrews—misunderstood it to mean that Jesus was one of the angels. So the author of Hebrews here is correcting that and saying, "No, no, no. Jesus is fully human. He took on a human nature in order to redeem human beings. He wasn't sent into this world to save the angels. He was sent into this world to save the descendants of Abraham. It's with the descendants of Abraham that He is concerned. Therefore, He took on their nature."

So it's emphasizing the fullness of Jesus' humanity. Now it continues by saying:

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God...
(Hebrews 2:17a-b)

What's that about? Well, if you look at the Old Testament, it's very clear that the highest office in worship was the high priest...and that he would be chosen from among the people of Israel. And so what the author of Hebrews is saying here is that if Jesus is going to be the high priest of the new covenant, then it stands to reason that He too has to be chosen from among men, because it's men who act as mediators between God and human beings. It's human priests who act as mediators. So He shares the nature of his brethren in every respect to become the true high priest in the service of God, in order to make expiation for the sins of His people.

That's probably there an allusion to the book of Leviticus 16, which describes the Day of Atonement. Because above all, the premiere day on which the Jewish high priest would make expiation or atonement for the sins of all of Israel was on the Day of Atonement. In Hebrew, it's called Yom Kippur. And on that day, all of the people would fast, abstain from food and drink, and they would go to Jerusalem. And the priest—the high priest—would offer a special sacrifice, both the offering of the scapegoat — which would be sent away into the desert — but then another sacrifice that would be brought into the temple itself, and the blood of that sacrifice would be sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant, in the Holy of Holies, seven times...in order to atone for the sins of the people.

And on that day, it was the one day that the high priest was actually allowed to pronounce the unpronounceable divine name, the Tetragrammaton, the four holy letters, YHWH—those four Hebrew letters. He would say the name aloud, and all of the people would bow down when they heard the sound of the name. And then he would go into the temple, and he would offer the sacrifice. And the blood of that sacrifice would atone or redeem...it would bring about the forgiveness of all of the sins of all of the people of Israel from the entire previous year. So once a year, the priest would go in to atone for the sin and to make expiation for the sins of his people.

And in this case, what the author of Hebrews is doing is saying that Christ Himself is the true high priest who is going to make expiation not just for His sins, but for the sins of all of humanity. And the reason He can do this is because He Himself has suffered and been tempted and is able to help those who themselves suffer and are tempted.

It isn't in this particular passage, but if you fast forward a few verses down to Hebrews 4:15, he will actually say:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Okay, the point here is...the letter of Hebrews is affirming both the fullness of Jesus's divinity—which it describes in chapter 1—but also the fullness of His humanity in chapter 2. And the reason the fullness of His humanity is so important is that if He is going to atone for the sins of humanity, if He's going to be the true high priest, then He has to be fully human. He has to share His human nature, and He has to be able to identify with His brothers, with human beings who suffer and who are tempted just as He was—the one difference being that He Himself did not sin.

Now, that's kind of the basic thrust of the passage. You might be thinking, "Well, what does any of that have to do with the Presentation of the Lord?" Well, remember, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord is not just the coming of God to Jerusalem, but the coming of God into His temple. So when Jesus comes into the temple, He doesn't just come as heir to David's throne or the Anointed Messiah or the new Moses. He also is the True High Priest. And so His coming into the temple—in a sense—anticipates the fact that as High Priest, He's going to be called to offer sacrifice. But the sacrifice that He offers is not going to be the blood of a bull or the blood of a goat on the Day of Atonement. It's going to be the blood that He offers from Himself—His own blood that He will offer on the sacrifice of Golgotha, on the mountain of Calvary at the crucifixion...which is precisely what Simeon prophesies about when He says, "This child..." in the Gospel for today:

...this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel..." (Luke 2:34b)

...and that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. So even though there's this great celebration of the coming of God into Jerusalem, we're not in the age of glory yet. There still is the shadow of the cross hanging over the Presentation of Jesus in the temple. And so the letter to the Hebrews today reminds us that unlike all the other high priests from the Old Testament who offered the blood of a bull or the blood of a goat, Jesus is going to offer Himself. So He is both high priest and victim. He's priest and victim. He is the offeror and He's the offering at the same time. He's both the high priest of the New Covenant and the sacrifice of the New Covenant that's going to establish the new relationship between God and humanity—and that above all, will bring out about the forgiveness of sins.

So on this feast of Candlemas, of the Presentation of Christ, while we remember the light of the world coming into the world at Christmas, and we still have kind of the memory of Christmas fresh in our mind, the Church also starts to point our eyes toward Calvary and toward the sacrifice of the One True High Priest, Jesus, who has entered into not the earthly temple in Jerusalem—that’s not where He carries out His sacrifice—but onto the mountain of Calvary and then up into the Heavenly Temple in the Ascension, where He will go into the Heavenly Holy of Holies to offer the blood of His sacrifice, to offer Himself to the Father, not once a year but over and over and over again, but once and for all eternally, in His eternal self-offering of love to the Father as Son in the Holy Spirit.

So in closing with that in mind, just a quick quote here. This is the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. It’s a real helpful collection of early Church Fathers and their comments on different passages. So this is the one on Hebrews, and it’s got a comment from St. Ambrose of Milan. He was the bishop of Milan who converted Augustine and played a huge role in the history of the Church. He’s one of the Doctors of the Church, and this is what he has to say about our passage for today in the second reading:

See in what way the writer calls him created: “In so far as he took upon him the seed of Abraham,” plainly asserting the begetting of a body. How else, indeed, but in his body did [Christ] expiate the sins of the people? In what did he suffer, except in his body—even as we said above: “Christ having suffered in the flesh”? In what is he a priest, except in that which he took to himself from the priestly nation? It is a priest’s duty to offering something, and, according to the law, to enter into the holy places by means of blood. Seeing then that God had rejected the blood of bulls and goats, this High Priest was indeed bound to make passage and entry into the holy of holies in heaven through his own blood in order that he might be the everlasting propitiation for our sins. Priest and victim, then, are one; the priesthood and sacrifice are, however, exercised under the conditions of humanity, for he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.²

² Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* 3.11

That's from St. Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith*, book 3.11. And I think in our day and time, it's really important to emphasize what Ambrose is saying there...is that the reason Christ's sacrifice was able to redeem humanity was because He was Himself fully human in all things except sin.