

Presentation of the Lord in the Temple February 2, 2014

Celebration Summary by Glenn CJ Byer, MA SLD: It is something of an anomaly to have an Old Testament reference in the Gospel that is not reflected in the first reading. In this case, the Gospel refers to the laws around redeeming the firstborn child and the purification of a woman after childbirth. The rule in Leviticus 12 concerning purification called for a lamb and pigeon or turtledove. It was only in the case of poverty that two birds could be offered instead. While this may be an insight into the economic status of the holy family, the architects of the Lectionary wanted to focus instead on what it meant to have Jesus come to the temple. The notion of the Lord coming to the temple is found in the reading from Malachi, and it is a fascinating moment. What would it mean, that God would come to the temple built to honor God? The psalm picks up this cry – it is a psalm of ascent that welcoming the king. But the Gospel shows us that the dedication of Christ in the temple was relatively uneventful – a couple of old people figured it out, but everyone else seems oblivious. Oddly it is the second reading that explains the feast. The dedication of Christ in the temple is not so much about God coming to his house, but rather about God in Christ coming to seek out his people, to be one with us and to save us. For this reason it was considered a part of the Christmas celebration, the celebration of God with us.

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First Reading Malachi 3:1-4

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Malachi

Thus says the Lord GOD:
Lo, I am sending my messenger
to prepare the way before me;
And suddenly there will come to the temple
the LORD whom you seek,
And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire.
Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.
But who will endure the day of his coming?
And who can stand when he appears?
For he is like the refiner's fire,
or like the fuller's lye.
He will sit refining and purifying silver,
and he will purify the sons of Levi,
Refining them like gold or like silver
that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD.
Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem

will please the LORD,
as in the days of old, as in years gone by.

The word of the Lord.

Malachi 3:1-4 Commentary by Tom Conry: The book of Malachi is believed to have been written during the dog days of the second temple period. The exile in Babylon was ended (though there is evidence that many would have stayed in Babylon if given the chance) and the restoration of the temple had finally been accomplished at enormous economic and social cost. Great prophets like Haggai and Zechariah had implied that this restoration would signal a new Israel, and perhaps a new empire on the scale of King David's.

What actually happened was quite the opposite. Israel became more and more of a cultural backwater as Persia and Greece slugged it out far away to the west for cultural supremacy. Instead of an expected new messianic age, Israel was ignored in the good times and oppressed by the Persian empire under Darius in the bad times. The covenant, the law, and the principal tenets of Judaism fell into disrepute and were largely forgotten. It seems to have been an era of profound disillusionment and bitter disappointment. Here is where Malachi comes on the scene, last of the Twelve Prophets, contemporary of Ezra, and the author of the last of the books of the Hebrew bible. Malachi promises a messenger, one who will prepare the way for God to rest once again in the temple. It is a striking and dangerous promise to make while under the domination of a foreign army. 3:1 implies divine intervention. Perhaps it is this that the defenders of Jerusalem (and later, Masada) were counting on as the Roman legions laid siege to the holy places.

In the following chapter, the text seems to identify this messenger with Elijah. This becomes a subject for speculation for certain Christian groups who identify John the Baptizer as the one preparing for Jesus.

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Responsorial Psalm Psalm 24:7, 8, 9, 10

℟(10b) Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord!

Lift up, O gates, your lintels;
reach up, you ancient portals,
that the king of glory may come in!

Who is this king of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.

Lift up, O gates, your lintels;
reach up, you ancient portals,
that the king of glory may come in!

Who is this king of glory?
The LORD of hosts; he is the king of glory.

Commentary Psalm 24:7, 8, 9, 10 by Deacon Owen Cummings: This is the day on which we celebrate the presentation of the child Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, as it is found in the Gospel of St. Luke. The story line is fairly straightforward: "When the day came to purify them according to the law of Moses, (Mary and Joseph) brought Jesus up to Jerusalem, so that he could be presented to the Lord..."

Ps. 24 beautifully interacts with this narrative, and invites our own personal interaction. We have only verses 7-10 in our psalm response, but if the entire psalm is read, it becomes clear that this was a liturgy for people entering the Temple, perhaps at an annual celebration of the New Year: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" [v. 3]. We have an image of a procession making its way into the Temple. When we come to our particular verses, the Temple gates are instructed to open up and permit the King of Glory to enter. Though we cannot be certain, it seems that at the tail end of this liturgical procession, the Ark of the Covenant was carried, signaling the very presence of God, the King of Glory. God is entering the Temple, as it were, above the Ark. On the Feast of the Presentation we recall the Son of God, Jesus, the King of Glory, entering the Temple too with Mary and Joseph. Perhaps we may think of ourselves as part of the glorious liturgical procession, not now as preceding the King of Glory but as participating in the King of Glory. We too, in Christ, are presented to the Lord, we too, in Christ, are to be "a revealing light to the Gentiles."

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Second Reading

Hebrews 2:14-18

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews

Since the children share in blood and flesh,
Jesus likewise shared in them,

that through death he might destroy the one
who has the power of death, that is, the Devil,
and free those who through fear of death
had been subject to slavery all their life.
Surely he did not help angels
but rather the descendants of Abraham;
therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters
in every way,
that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God
to expiate the sins of the people.
Because he himself was tested through what he suffered,
he is able to help those who are being tested.

The word of the Lord.

Commentary Hebrews 2:14-18 by Tom Conry: The Epistle to the Hebrews is generally is an argument for a community of believers to have trust in spite of persecution; trust in God, trust in their own faith, and trust in one another. This particular pericope is striking for its affirmation of solidarity; Jesus is important precisely because he is flesh and blood, not one of the angels. The author (who is almost certainly not Paul) argues powerfully that it is only because Jesus suffered what the rest of us suffer that he is become the liberator, delivering all the wandering people of God. The rhetoric of this section goes to considerable lengths to emphasize that Jesus' humanity lies at the core of his mission. As befits a letter to a community that seems to be in the midst of suffering and danger, the author carefully avoids spiritualizing Jesus or removing him to another plane of existence. In fact, this is the most striking part of the author's line of reasoning: that Jesus has come not to take hold of angels (and let's give thanks for that!) but to share in the lot of people and to shatter their mortal destiny.

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Gospel Acclamation Luke 2:32

✠ Alleluia, alleluia.

A light of revelation to the Gentiles
and glory for your people Israel.

Gospel Luke 2:22-40

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

When the days were completed for their purification
according to the law of Moses,
Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem
to present him to the Lord,
just as it is written in the law of the Lord,
Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,
and to offer the sacrifice of
a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,
in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.
This man was righteous and devout,
awaiting the consolation of Israel,
and the Holy Spirit was upon him.
It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit
that he should not see death
before he had seen the Christ of the Lord.
He came in the Spirit into the temple;
and when the parents brought in the child Jesus
to perform the custom of the law in regard to him,
he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

"Now, Master, you may let your servant go
in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel."

The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him;
and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,
"Behold, this child is destined
for the fall and rise of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be contradicted
—and you yourself a sword will pierce—
so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

There was also a prophetess, Anna,
the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.
She was advanced in years,
having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage,
and then as a widow until she was eighty-four.
She never left the temple,
but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.
And coming forward at that very time,

she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Commentary Luke 2:22-40 by Fr. Damien Dougherty, O.F.M.: Jesus' response to Mary's anguished question regarding his motivation in remaining in the Temple has been the subject of much discussion as his mysterious words are difficult to interpret. However, the profound sense of his answer can be gleaned when two other terms are underscored and the first is the verb, "I must" as this expression (Greek: *dêi*) always and only recurs in Luke in reference to the Jesus' passion viewed as the fulfillment of a prophecy. Hence, here as well, it would indicate the return of Jesus to the Father, i.e., his death and resurrection.

The second intriguing phrase is Jesus' manner of referring to "my Father," particularly following Mary's use of the term with regard to Joseph. This construction has to be appreciated as one in a series of texts in which Jesus always says "my Father" and never "our Father," expressing in this way not only the feeling of one who lives a particular, affective and religious union with God, but also the self-awareness of being the Son of God in a unique mode.

There is, lastly, the theme of the incomprehension of Jesus' audience that, whenever it occurs in Luke, is always found to be in relation to the passion of Jesus. Therefore, this lack of understanding does not depend upon anyone's culpability but from the fact that the passion of Jesus, here being alluded to on the horizon, would have to remain a terrible mystery for all until the dawning of the Easter light

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