

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018**  
**Candlemas (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Malachi 3.1-5**

**NT: Hebrews 2.14-end**

**G: Luke 2.22-40**

“Well, you’re going to have to think about giving up your season ticket...”. This dreaded phrase has been uttered to me more than once, and by more than one person, in recent times; it tends to come up whenever the subject of my training for ordained ministry is raised; the reasons given for this are lack of money, and, in the short and longer term, lack of time. Whilst I hear this and understand the logic, giving up regularly watching my beloved Everton (and I hope it goes without saying that my season ticket is for Everton), is a difficult, even upsetting thing to contemplate; so much of my personal history, identity, self-image, so many of my important relationships, so much of who I think I am, seems to be so integrally bound up with this football club, that giving up my ticket feels like a very real sacrifice. Sacrifice. The definition of the word ‘sacrifice’ in The Oxford English Dictionary is the: ‘Act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.’ So, if I am willing give up my ticket for the sake of training for ordained ministry in the Church of England, this must mean that I regard this calling as more important or worthy than watching Everton...hmm – I need to think about this a bit more...

Our Gospel reading today begins with a sacrificial act as Mary ‘offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord’; this Levitical law (Lev 12: 6-8) required the mother of a child to make a sacrificial offering at the Temple forty days after giving birth, a ceremonial act of atonement in which the mother would bring ‘a lamb in its first year for a burnt-offering and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering’ which the priest would then ‘offer before the LORD’, although Leviticus states ‘If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall

take two turtle-doves or two pigeons'; as we read in Luke's Gospel, Mary makes the offering of the poor (although I like to think that she offered pigeons and not turtle-doves as pigeons are not a protected species!). No doubt these birds would have been of some significant value to Mary and her family as a source of food, but given that Levitical law required these offerings for the cleansing of ceremonial defilement after childbirth, the sacrifice of the birds was clearly given for something considered more important or worthy: it brought Mary back into proper covenant relationship with God and allowed her and Joseph to bring their child forward for the ritual of the redemption of the firstborn, and the dedication of the child to God.

Of course, that this child is the Christ, the Messiah, is recognised by Simeon and Anna; however, whilst understanding the special significance of their child, Mary and Joseph would not have realised the exact nature of this significance, nor realised the full implications that Messiahship entailed for their son. As far as Mary is concerned, she is sacrificing pigeons; what she does not realise is that, in this same moment, God too is making a sacrificial offering: the offering of Himself as His Beloved Son. For Saint Augustine, God 'determined to be himself that sacrifice, rather than to receive it'; 'Thus [Christ] is both the priest, who made the offering himself, and the oblation.' This means that Christ is both that which is offered and he who offers, a double-significance also emphasised by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. This sacrifice is, of course, the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice compared to which all others are but shadows of this, the ideal of sacrifice. But why? Why does God make this sacrifice? For the author of Hebrews, it is 'to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people'. So, as Mary was ritually cleansed through her offering, so God's sacrifice of Himself is for our cleansing; Jesus is Malachi's 'refiner's fire' and 'fuller's soap', so that, in the words of the Prayer of Humble Access, 'our sinful bodies may be made clean by

his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood'. This sacrifice is transformative, cleansing us of sin 'until we present offerings to the Lord in righteousness', bringing us into covenant relationship with God, a new covenant.

So, where are Mary and Joseph in all of this? Did they choose to sacrifice their son for our sakes? Maybe not, almost certainly not at that moment in the temple – but they did make one decision, a decision they kept on making whenever they were given a choice to make: they chose to trust God. So, why should we trust God? Because of the sacrifice of Himself which God makes as Jesus Christ. If our definition of sacrifice is the 'Act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy', this means that God considers us, our redemption, our salvation, more important or worthy than His own self, than His Beloved Son; just think about that for a moment – the implications of this are profound and transformative – this is true love: God, the Creator, that which is greater than anything we can imagine, wants to be in relationship with us so much that he sacrifices Himself – God loves us.

So, the question is: what do we do? God sacrifices Himself to be in relationship with us, his creation; so how do we respond? Well, like Adam and Eve, the first thing we often do is hide: as Lisa Simpson says to her father Homer in *The Simpsons*: 'Dad, it's just that too much of your love can really be...scary.' However, Homer replies: 'Some day you'll thank me for all this scary love.' God reaches out to us in relationship through the sacrifice that is Christ and we are called to reach back – after all, a relationship is something created in partnership, so for God to be in relationship with us, we need to be in relationship with Him. Yet we know from our own experience that, in creating and living a relationship, we always have to give something of ourselves, and that, potentially, some part of us has to die

to give life to the relationships we create; but in doing this, in creating relationship, we rebuild each other: we are our relationships, we make each other. So, as God reaches out to us with sacrifice, we have to reach back with sacrifice too. So, what does God want us to sacrifice? Well, He wants all that we have to give: ourselves; as we say together after Communion 'we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.' Now, the truth is that sacrifice is hard; and sacrifice always changes us; but, even when it seems to take things away from us, it helps us become ourselves, refining, focusing us on the things that are essential, the things that truly make us who we are. And sacrifice is a choice; like Mary and Joseph, we are always asked to choose relationship with God, and to trust God. And when we sacrifice ourselves to God, we are transformed – and always, ultimately, for the better. When we sacrifice ourselves to God, when we give ourselves to Him, we move more deeply into relationship with our Creator, fall more deeply into Love, and so reach ever higher towards God. So how do we sacrifice ourselves to God? We do it in prayer, in worship, in how we think, work, play, live, in our relationships, in who, how and what we are, as broken as we are. In the words of Psalm 51: 'The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' And when we make this sacrifice of our broken selves, when we offer to God all that we have, we are given more than we could ever give away: we are made whole.

Louis Johnson