

Sunday 1 February 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

Candlemas

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

OT: Malachi 3:1-5

NT: Hebrews 2:14-end

Gp: Luke 2:22-40

Why are we told the story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple? No other gospel writer apart from Luke mentions it. Clearly very little was known about Jesus' infancy and childhood. Two of the gospels don't even include a story of his birth. So why does Luke pause to tell us about this episode?

Like the other birth and infancy narratives, this is clearly a symbolic story. It is meant to express something about the identity of Jesus and his impact on the lives of the early believers. It's not as dramatic as Luke's birth stories, with annunciations and angels in choirs. In some ways, it is a very mundane event: a couple have a child and go to offer sacrifice. It is the common practice in the Jewish context of the time. A firstborn son belonged to God and had to be redeemed; and a woman had to offer sacrifice to make her ritually clean again after childbirth. They are not wealthy, so their sacrifice is of two birds rather than a sheep.

But, of course, this being a story about Jesus, the ordinary always contains within it the extraordinary. This story, and the next one about the child Jesus being lost and found in the temple, act as a hinge between the drama of the birth and Jesus' adult ministry.

Something of the wonder and promise of the birth is echoed. Our revered elders in the faith, Simeon and Anna, welcome and bless the child. As faithful followers of God's covenant with the Jewish people, they stand for the hope of Israel: the hope for a fulfilment of God's promise to be with his people and write his ways on their hearts. They welcome the dawning light.

However, this welcoming of the light is also a story of shadow. The threat of conflict and death falls upon the child. Simeon says that he can now go in peace: but he promises Mary that a sword will pierce her heart. For Jesus will reveal the secret contents of our hearts and our characters. And that kind of truth, that kind of light, can make us react with fear and violence.

As Jesus is presented in the Temple, the shadow of the cross is already at work.

And this helps us to see what the story is about. It is a scene of offering. Of sacrifice. Sacrifice was at the heart of Jewish worship, and it has played a part in most human cultures. To draw near to God, to restore a right relationship with the powers of the sacred,

something must be offered, given up. And often this meant the killing of animals or even people. The blood of life had to be offered back to its giver.

This can appear a very strange way of looking at the world. But it obviously runs deep in the human psyche. Even in our more secular context, as we pursue this-worldly ideals, the language of sacrifice lingers on in a hidden way. And when it is hidden, and unexamined, it can be a very destructive idea indeed.

Sacrifice is a powerful symbol, but it is also a problem. The Bible recognises that. As the Hebrew scriptures developed, there was clearly re-evaluation of sacrifice going on. It was made clear that God does not need sacrifices, as if God relied on them for food. In the prophets, we hear God denouncing and refusing sacrifices when issues of justice are neglected. In some passages in the prophets and psalms, it is the sacrifice of the heart, the giving of oneself, that matters more than animal sacrifice.

So when we see Jesus' life, and especially his death as a sacrifice, we need to ask: what kind of sacrifice? It seems absurd, and an offence to God's love, to say that God needs a blood sacrifice before he is able to forgive sins, for instance.

Sacrifice is never an end in itself: it is a way of restoring relationship. It is an expression that all is gift, all belongs to God. Much the same can be said of sacrifice as Jesus says of the sabbath: we are not made for the it, it is made for us. Sacrifice is not self-punishment. Nor is it an arbitrary law that we - let alone God - have to follow. It exists so we learn to give ourselves to God, as God gives himself to us.

Our second reading explores this deeper meaning of sacrifice. It is from the letter to the Hebrews. As the name implies, it was probably intended for a Jewish audience. So much of how it portrays Jesus uses the Temple, the priesthood and sacrifice for its imagery. Jesus is both high priest and sacrifice. He is the one who enters into the intimate presence of God, so we can enter that presence too.

In our reading we heard that 'He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.' It wasn't angels he came to save. It was flesh and blood. It was *us*, in our messy, compromised humanity.

Jesus as high priest is quite unlike any other high priest. He makes himself like us, rather than being set apart. He does not keep pure. He mingles with sinners, breaks bread with the broken. He throws himself fully into our humanity, and in his own flesh, he offers it back to God.

In a sense, Jesus's sacrifice is the end of all sacrifice as commonly understood. This is not a God who wants to punish and break us, but a God with us; a God who loves us so much he offers himself when all we have to offer is betrayal and death.

This is not a magical, supernatural transaction. It is the divine love made wholly human.

Perhaps this is why, in the story of the presentation, the angels take a back seat. The human story takes centre stage. It is a story of long-cherished hopes renewed; but also a recognition that in this world, love is cut down. Jesus will face all of that for us. He will be the victim of all those sacrifices which mistake death for life. And he will show us that the true offering of a divine heart is stronger than all of it. He shares our flesh and blood 'so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death.' We are never finally lost or alone.

We go back to that ordinary event. A couple with a child. We go back, especially to Mary. For here, she is the priest who offers God's body to the world. She is the one who follows her Son in faith, who allows her heart to be broken open by his love. That is why she is our mother in faith, our sister on the way, and the one who shows Jesus to us. With our Lady, then, let us join our sacrifices to the one great sacrifice, the gift of life in all its fullness: the offering of Love itself.

Fr Steven Shakespeare