

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Feb 2nd 2017

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

The Church's title for this feast is the Presentation of the Lord. We might prefer to say "the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple," because it is about the very human baby Jesus. But the liturgical title really catches best the apparent artistic and theological intention of its author, Luke. For in this gospel Gabriel has already announced the unborn Jesus as Son of the Most High. Elizabeth has already implicitly called the child in Mary's womb Lord when she greets Mary as "mother of my Lord." And the angel of the Lord has announced the birth of Jesus as a savior who is "Messiah and Lord."

So Luke is fully aware of the wonderful irony when he writes that Mary and Joseph took him 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.'" What is more, the child's parents will offer the sacrifice of 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,' "in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord." The child, who will eventually be publically proclaimed by his followers as Messiah and Lord, begins his earthly existence as being obediently subject to the Lord God, whom he will address in prayer as Father.

A further divine irony, their offering of the sacrifice of a couple of birds, as a way of redeeming the firstborn from what would be human sacrifice, is done for the very person, Jesus, who will, thirty years from this moment, offer himself to redeem the world from the slavery of their sin.

The righteous elder Simeon knows the whole story. He gathers the child into his arms and blesses God by uttering words that have become part of the Church's liturgy of the Hours, the canticle that we call, from the first words in Latin, the *Nunc dimittis*. Using language that a slave might use upon being given his freedom, Simeon says, "Now, Master, you may let your servant (*doulos*, "slave") go in peace, according to your word." Then, in words echoing the prophet Isaiah (Isa 40:5; 42:6; 49:6; 46:13), he describes Jesus as the suffering Servant Israel, who will be salvation in person, the glory of his people Israel and "a light for revelation to the gentiles." There, of course, is where we come in. We are included among those gentiles. Israel's mission becomes Jesus' mission. And those of us who claim Servant Jesus, as our risen Lord, take that mission as our own as well. You might say that this is Luke's epiphany narrative. Our prayer these days can well be, "Teach us, Lord, to so deeply receive Jesus as our light that we become light to those around us."

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