

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24 (23); Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

The Presentation in the Temple

Luke 2:21 *After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.* 22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Luke 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Luke 2:33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Luke 2:36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She

never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This feast used to be called the Purification and this word is still mentioned at the very start of the reading (“to be purified” in the Jerusalem Bible). The change of name reflects perhaps a sensitivity around the whole idea of purification after childbirth, called churching in not so distant past. It would not be helpful to dwell too much on this, but it can be understood at least from the point of view of cultural anthropology.

In ancient cultures (and still today), contact with the sacred or the Holy rendered one “impure”—not morally impure, of course, but ritually impure. The causes were various: contact with a corpse, any discharge of the fluids associated with procreation and, not least, childbirth itself. Two specific comments may help. (a) In those days, the sacred was considered both life-giving and dangerous. You can see why. In the days before antibiotics and good hygiene, infant mortality was high and death in childbirth common. The need to be purified was a real acknowledgement that the sacred has been encountered (true to the experience of parents today). (b) As a result, both mother and child underwent a period of absence from the community and had to be integrated safely, so to speak, by means of certain rituals. Thus the dangerous contact with the sacred was rendered safe for them and for others. See below Leviticus 12.

Thought for the day

Our Gospel today describes two very old people—Simeon and Anna—who are very attractive in their old age. They have lived prayerful lives of faith and, in particular, of hope and expectation. Being wise, they are people of discernment and they recognise the moment of grace, the coming of the Messiah. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be like them in old age? The secret is to be now what we hope to be then. If we wish to be serene, wise, discerning, full of faith—then now is the time: As St Paul says: “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Cor 6:2)

Prayer

Abba, Father, God of all time, you call us to become your children. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts that we may live our faith serenely in the present moment and give us grace to recognise the time of your appearing.

In this way, sense can be made of certain cultural practices, common in many religions, including classical Judaism. There is no going back to churching, of course, not least because the division of persons, places and times into sacred and profane no longer makes any sense after the incarnation. The Letter to the Hebrews is a great help deepening our understanding of the effects of the incarnation such as the rendering obsolete of practices like purification after childbirth.

KIND OF WRITING

Perhaps it is good to recall again that the Infancy Gospels in both Matthew and Luke are always written with four lenses: the Old Testament, history, Christology and ecclesiology. (i) Old Testament: as we see the anecdotes reflect Old Testament practices such as purification and circumcision. It is also the case here that Luke writes in the Greek of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, creating an atmosphere of Old Testament piety and expectation in the figures of Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna. (ii)

History: the purification of Mary and circumcision of Jesus are surely historical facts, even if no other early sources confirm them. (iii) Christology: the stories are written always in the light of the Resurrection. (iv) Ecclesiology: the writing reflects early Christian teaching about and exploration of the identity of Jesus, using Old Testament models and themes. The patterning of stories is clear from our experience of the previous texts.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean. (Leviticus 12:1-8)

Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. When in the future your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall answer, 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.' (Ex 13:13-15)

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed

time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God. (Ex 23:14-17)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

See all of Luke 1-2.

ST PAUL

See Galatians 4:4-7.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 22-24 There are three elements here: (a) purification—of the mother only, hence “their” is odd; (b) presentation of the child (not his redemption); offering of the child to God along the lines of Samuel. The child is not ransomed but presented (see Ex 13).

Verse 25-32 “Now” introduces the expected prophetic statement combining praise of God and an indication of the child’s destiny. The comfort or consolation is written with Is 40:1ff. in mind. The consolation of Israel is precisely in the Messiah of the Lord. Simeon models the waiting of Israel for the coming Christ. In the hymn, to dismiss means to allow to die. The word salvation is rare in the New Testament (Luke 2:30; 3:6; Acts 28:28; Eph 6:17) and almost confined to the Lucan writings. Light is the key metaphor here. We are perhaps meant to think of Isaiah: The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Is 52:10) The coming of the Messiah includes glory. Cf. I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory. (Is 46:13) In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory. (Is 45:25)

Verses 33-35 There is a blessing for the parents, with a particular part addressed to Mary. Jesus’ ministry will have two effects: acceptance and rejection. Behind the language of falling may lie the much used metaphor of the stumbling block, found widely in the New Testament. The parenthesis in v. 35 here is as awkward in Greek as in English and may be editorial.

Verses 36-40 Considerable emphasis is

placed on Anna’s advanced age and well attested piety. “At that very moment” is a frequent phrase in Luke 10:21; 12:12; 13:31; 20:19; 24:33 Acts 16:18; 22:13. To praise here comprises recognition, obedience and proclamation, all done in public. V. 40 is a second “conclusion” of sorts (cf. 1:80 and 2:52). The emphasis on growth, physical, spiritual and social, goes against a constant tendency in the tradition to underplay the very real humanity of Jesus.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It was a day that started without any expectation of something unusual. It turned out to be a day with a meeting they would remember for a long time. Perhaps you have had significant meetings on what you expected to be just an ordinary day?

2. Simeon gave thanks because his eyes saw the salvation God had prepared. In what ways have you experienced God’s salvation in your life: an experience of being loved, or discovering a sense of purpose in life, or being touched by the wonders of creation? Give thanks for those memories.

3. Simeon also acknowledged that not all would accept the light that would shine through Jesus, and this rejection would be a cause of pain to Mary. It can be a source of pain to parents, teachers, church ministers, and all who work for others when some reject values, projects, advice which would be for their good. Even within ourselves we can be aware of division, at times being open to the light of God and at other times resisting it. Have you known the pain of that struggle? What has helped you to keep seeking the light of God in your life?

4. The final sentence speaks of Jesus as one who grew and became strong and was filled with wisdom. Recall times when you had a sense of growing up in some way. What brought that about? Think also of how you have seen growth in another person.

PRAYER

Inspired by your Spirit, Lord, we gather in your temple to welcome your Son. Enlighten our minds and lay bare our inmost thoughts. Purify your people, and make us obedient to the demands of your law, so that we may mature in wisdom and grow to full stature in your grace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Because Christ himself is tested, he is able to help those who are tested

Heb 2:14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore 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, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Part of the letter to the Hebrews are strikingly clear and these are the verses used in the liturgy for Holy Week, such as Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9. Such passage underline the true humanity of Jesus, shared with us.

KIND OF WRITING

In terms of the overall layout of Hebrews, v. 14 belongs to the previous exhortation and v.15ff. opens up the next, central reflection on Jesus as our high priest (4:15-10:18). Frequently in Hebrews, there are link words in a conclusion, taking us from one teaching to another. 4:15-16 finds a parallel in 5:1-10.

In this portion of Hebrews, the steps are as follows:

- I. 4:15-5:10 Jesus, merciful and compassionate high priest
- II. 5:11-6:20 Exhortation to maturity, leading to the central teaching
- III. 7:1-28 Jesus, high priest after the order of Melchizedek
- IV. 8:1-10:18 Jesus' sacrifice

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

It is clear from Hebrews that we are dealing with a second generation, baptised, fully instructed community of believers. And yet, something has happened and things are not as they were or ought to be. There are contradictory indications: they are infantile (5:11-14) and yet mature (they can be expected to grasp his argument). Some have fallen away and, even among the committed,

attendance at assemblies of the community has fallen. Nothing much new here, I'm afraid.

RELATED PASSAGES

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." (Hebrews 2:10-12)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16) Cf. also Hebrews 5:1-10.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 "Flesh and blood" is an example of hendiadys (lit. "one through two") and means the whole human person, the entire business of being human. To share means to have common and to also to have a share in (a slightly different nuance). Death, of course, is the single great issue for all of us. Using somewhat apocalyptic language, the writer identifies the devil as holding power over death.

Verse 15 The positive statement here is very strong: humans are to be liberated not only from death itself but even from the fear of death. In ordinary experience, death holds us in thrall and we are effectively slaves, unfree.

Verse 16 A further clarification regarding the angels, a topic which has preoccupied the writer from the start of the letter. In contrast, Jesus came to help human beings, described as the descendants of Abraham, meaning the people of Israel.

Verse 17 This verse affirms the true

humanity of Jesus — he is like us *in every way*. The contrast with the old way of being priest (by separation) is very strong here. Jesus helps us as a priest not because he is different from us but because he is precisely like us. It is not the blood which saves but the interior disposition of the Jesus as priest: merciful and faithful. This faithfulness of Jesus brought him into the very presence of God.

On the use of expression "high priest", see First use of High Priest: Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:20; 7:26-8:1; 8:3; 9:7, 11, 25; 13:11.

The word translated "atone" or "expiate" (*hilaskomai*) is rare in the New Testament. A form of the word in Luke 18:13 can be translated "be merciful," and at 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 the usage is the same as found here in v. 17. At Heb 9:5 the word occurs as a noun of place in a description of the "mercy seat," an altar in the Temple's holy of holies on which blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. In Rom 3:25 it is used in a reference to Christ as our "mercy seat." Neither in the LXX (the Greek Old Testament) nor in the New Testament does the word mean "propitiate" in the sense of placating or appeasing God, since it is not human but divine initiative that effects mercy and atonement. Human beings do not act or speak so as to make God gracious; we have already been alerted that the drama unfolding is "by the grace of God" (2:9)

Verse 18 This verse is like v. 14 and takes us back to the heart of the letter. The whole section (vv. 10-18) will be unfolded in the subsequent chapters. As a result, these verse are compressed and intense and not so easy to understand.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Do I fear death? Have I sense the freedom from such fear that comes in Christ?
2. There is a great comfort in our shared humanity with Jesus—he *can* help us, because he is like us.

PRAYER

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

The Lord will enter his Temple

Mal 2:17 *You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"*

Mal. 3:1 [The Lord God says this:] See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord (Adon) whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The somewhat threatening tone in this reading doesn't sit so well with the gentle story in Luke 2. However, it does put before us an important Old Testament text.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole section is a dispute, in the form of a response and a threat to those who approach God with breath-taking presumption and complacency. Compare Mal 2:17 with 3:5. The verses in between tell how God will impose his judgement by the sending of a messenger (the very verses of the lectionary reading). The layout of the dispute is similar to that in the other disputes in Malachi.

Thesis: 2:17 Accusation

Body: 3:1-4 Promise

Conclusion: 3:5 Judgement.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Many scholars would locate the book of Malachi (= my messenger) in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, that is, mid-5th century bc. They share the political context of Persian overlordship and similar religious / political problems. It seems likely that the author was an official at the Temple, calling on the priests to officiate sincerely and on the people to support the cult financially.

The book is short and consists of the following sections:

- 1:1 *Superscription*
- 1:2-5 God's love for Israel
- 1:6-2:9 Priestly corruption
- 2:10-16 The people's infidelity
- 2:17-3:5 Cleansing of the people
- 3:6-12 Paying for worship
- 3:13-4:3 Hope for the people
- 4:4-6 *Appendix: Moses / Elijah*

Accordingly, our reading comes from section 5 above, dealing with the cleansing of the Temple.

RELATED PASSAGES

You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. (Isaiah 43:24)

Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23-24 in the splendid NJB version)

A voice cries, 'Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh. Make a straight highway for our God across the wastelands. Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be levelled, every cliff become a plateau, every escarpment a plain; then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed and all humanity will see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.' (Isaiah 40:3-5; cf. also Jer 31:31-33)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 It is possible that those being attacked are the levitical priests. As for wearying God, see Isaiah 43:24 (above) and Mal 3:14-15: You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape." (Malachi 3:14-15)

Verse 1 God responds urgently to the questioning of his justice. No one really knows what kind of messenger the writer had in mind. Notice in v. 1 the

sudden shift from the first person to the third. It feels as if the prophet interrupts God to get quickly to the main "advent" that of God himself. It is hard to figure out the relationship between this Lord (adon) and the angel (malakh). An "angel of the Lord" could be a pious euphemism for God himself. The covenant may refer to the new covenant as enunciated by Jeremiah.

Verse 2 The coming of the Lord will not be comfortable for everyone. Fire is dangerous - it purifies but also destroys. God's presence is often compared to fire: Ex 23:20; 19:16; The question is not longer will he come but will you be ready for his arrival?

Verse 3 It is the priests who are in need of such radical purification. "Right" sacrifices are those done in accordance with the legal prescriptions.

Verse 4 The word used for pleasing (or sweet) has a range of meanings, including the sense of "mixed." The meaning here is found elsewhere in the Bible: Jer 31:26; Prov 3:24, Ez 16:37; Jer 6:20.

Verse 5 The original accusation was that God was distant, unconcerned and even absent. Here is plain assertion of the opposite. V. 5 is in reality a robust response to 2:17..

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We can all feel at times that God is indifferent (putting it gently). It is no harm to acknowledge such feelings (as in 2:17) but also to challenged them (as in 3:15).

2. From time to time we have the sense that our prayer or our worship is not really from the heart. We could reflection using the line from the story of the Samaritan Woman: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." (John 4:21)

PRAYER

O God, you love us enough to desire a response from deep within, from our whole selves. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts, the same Spirit who helps us when we do not know how to pray as we ought.

THE LITURGY

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24 (23); Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Malachi reading doesn't quite fit the gentle entry in Luke 2. It is more an accommodated use, to put it mildly. This happens from time to time — a sign of a basis in the patristic reading of Old Testament texts.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 24 (23) is associated with processions with the ark of the covenant and so, very fitting for today's feast.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Malachi 3:1-4

This rather fierce prophecy was offered at a time of religious reconstruction after disaster. There is no mistaking the plain meaning that it is the leadership which is in need of purification.

Second Reading

Hebrews 2:14-18

As we can see from the stories of his birth, Jesus can help us because he is one of us. This is a deeply reassuring teaching from the Letter to the Hebrews.

Gospel

Luke 2:22-40

There are so few old people in the New Testament, that it is delightful to find such wonderful characters as Simeon and Anna, still full of faith.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 3 February

St Blaise, bishop and martyr

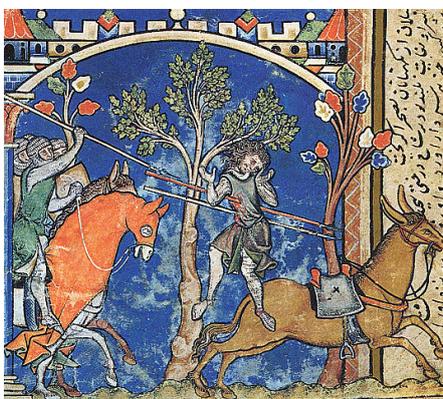
2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30, 16:5-13

David is found out and rightly condemned — he accepts the critique in a surprisingly humble manner.

Mark 5:1-20

This story is not without its humorous exaggeration, as the pigs request a “stay” of execution! The overall intent is deadly serious: the forces of evil are comprehensively destroyed.

Tuesday 4 February



2 Samuel 18:9-10, 14, 24-25, 30-19:3

This is one of the most moving stories in the entire Old Testament. Absalom has rebelled again his father, but David still mourned him as his son.

Mark 6:1-6

It is surprising to see Jesus *unable* to do anything, so this scene is certainly historical. We do can block the action of grace in our own lives...

Wednesday 5 February

St Agatha, virgin and martyr

2 Samuel 24:2, 8-17

In the Bible, why would a census be a sin? Possibly because the people belong to God, not to the king. True to his character, David repents, but is punished all the same.

Mark 6:1-6

This remarkable story is surely historical because it shows the powerlessness of Jesus. It is also a hint to us: sheer familiarity can close our eyes and our hearts to what God is doing today through the Gospel.

Thursday 6 February

St Paul Miki and companions, martyrs

1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12

The tumultuous career of David comes to a close and, as his death approaches, he has advice for Solomon, his son and successor.

Mark 6:7-13

Jesus empowers the twelve to undertake

the very same ministry of proclaiming and healing. They are to travel light, taking nothing extra that might impede them and also taking the risk of being welcomed *or not*, as the case may be.

Friday 7 February

St Mel, bishop



Ecclesiasticus 47:2-13

David's status grew after the Exile in Babylon. Our reading today is a late Jewish reflection, which helps us to see how people viewed David just before the time of Jesus, himself a son of David.

Mark 6:14-29

At the hands of Mark, the death of John the Baptism foreshadows the destiny of Jesus. The arbitrariness of John's beheading—to honour an oath spoken in a frivolous moment—is still shocking.

Saturday 8 February

1 Kings 3:4-13

This scene is a key to Solomon's reputation for wisdom. God's makes a very open offer to Solomon and, significantly, he opts to the spiritual gifts, which would make him famous.

Mark 6:30-34

It is instructive to see that Jesus himself was aware of need to balance life and work, prayer and ministry. This is true of us all in our different roles.

At the same time, Jesus felt compassion for the crowd and, in spite of the need of rest and refreshment, actually responded to their need.