

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Ecclesiastes 3:3-7, 14-17; Psalm 128 (127); Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:22-40

The child grew and became strong,
filled with wisdom; and the favour of
God was upon him.

Luke 2:22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus 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 story is also read for the Presentation (2 February), which used to be called the Purification, a word is still mentioned at the very start of the reading. The change of name reflects perhaps a sensitivity around the whole idea of purification after childbirth, called churching in the not so distant past. It would not at all be helpful to dwell too much on this, but it can be understood at least from the point of view of religious anthropology.

In pre-modern cultures, contact with the sacred or the Holy rendered one “impure”—not *morally* impure but *ritually* impure. The causes were various: contact with a corpse, any discharge of the fluids associated with procreation and, not least, childbirth itself. (a) In those

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: *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.

days, the sacred was considered both life-giving and dangerous. You can see why. In the time before antibiotics and good hygiene, infant mortality was high and death in childbirth common. (b) The need to be “purified” acknowledged that the sacred has been encountered in the godlike action of 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 Hebrew Bible, history, Christology and ecclesiology. (i) *Hebrew Bible*: 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 OT, the Septuagint, creating an atmosphere of OT 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 Christ-

ian teaching about and exploration of the identity of Jesus, using OT models and themes. The patterning of stories is clear in both Matthew and Luke.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. (Gen 17:12)

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (Lev 12:3)

Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine. (Exod 13:2)

The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which is offered to the LORD, shall be yours; but the firstborn of human beings you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. Their redemption price, reckoned from one month of age, you shall fix at five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary (that is, twenty gerahs). (Num 18:15–16)

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. (Lev 12:1–5)

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. (Lev 12:6–8)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Luke 1-2, in light of comments above.

ST PAUL

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 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 is along the lines of Samuel. The child is not ransomed but presented (see Exodus 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 waiting of Israel for the coming Christ. In the hymn, to dismiss means to allow to die. The word salvation is rare in the NT (Luke 2:30; 3:6; Acts 28:28; Eph 6:17) and almost confined to the Lucan oeuvre. 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 NT. 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

O God, you cradle us at the beginning of life and embrace us at our journey’s end, for you love us as your own. Bind our families together and deepen our faith, that, like the Holy Family of Nazareth, we may grow in wisdom, obedient to your word.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts

Col 3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Col 3:18 *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* 19 *Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.*

Col 3:20 *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.* 21 *Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the *Liturgical Calendar*, it is recommended to use the shorter version, vv. 12-17. You can see why once you read vv. 18-19, 20-21, even though these last few lines are the real reason the passage was chosen for the feast. Without mentioning family specifically, the message of harmony and forgiveness would still be of relevance today to any community or family.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The clue for the occasion of Colossians is provided by 2:8 and its amplification in vv. 9-23 (too long to cite):

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

From the subsequent verses, it is apparent that this "heresy" offered a spiritual path to perfection combining in some unclear way visions, angels, feasts, rituals, dietary laws and some kind of asceticism. The writer's assessment is both

clear and negative:

All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. (Colossians 2:22-23)

Scholars dispute the authorship, date and location of Colossians. The reasons for the puzzle is that the letter is so close to Philemon and contains much Pauline vocabulary. At the same time, significant teachings are absent (e.g. justification) and other teachings are taken to a new level (e.g. the cosmic Christ). There is also a puzzling link with Ephesians, which reads almost as a commentary on Colossians. Archaeologically, near-by Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in 60/61 and immediately rebuilt (at the citizens' own expense, they proudly recalled). Colossae, as far as is known, was also destroyed but was never rebuilt. Bearing in mind differences in vocabulary and unconscious differences in grammatical style (especially conjunctions and connectives, so frequent in Paul), it seems sensible to affirm the this much:

The letter is a product of a post-Pauline school, written after Philemon but before Ephesians. An approximate date would be the 70s or 80s, after both the death of Paul and destruction of Colossae. All would have recognised this document as an updating of the apostle for a later time in the form of a general letter to the churches in Asia Minor. It is, therefore, the first of the Deuteropaulines.

KIND OF WRITING

After an introduction (1:10-14) and a conclusion (4:7-18), the body of the letter has two parts:

1:15-2:23 Theology

3:1-4:4 Exhortation

3:1-4 Summary

3:5-17 Old and new life in Christ

3:18-4:1 The Christian household

4:2-6 Conclusion and prayer

RELATED PASSAGES

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiri-

tual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:18-20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 The address is familiar (cf. Rom 8:33; 1 Pet 2:9). Notice the five virtues—great for reflection.

Verse 13 Reality is recognised: there are tensions and there is need for forgiveness. The motive is clear and comes from the teaching of Jesus (Mt 6:14-15).

Verse 14 Here the writer is close both to Jesus (Mark 12:28-34) and to Paul (Rom 13:8, 10; Gal 5:14; 1 Cor 13).

Verse 15 This prayer reminds Christians of the calling in Christ. Thankful in Greek is *eucharistoi*, "grateful people." There is a liturgical feel to the letter: 1:3; 1:12, 2:7.

Verse 16 The first instruction is especially relevant today: the word of Christ, that is the Good News. Mutual teaching and common prayer bring it all together. Thus, taking the Word seriously is very much part of being *eucharistoi*.

Verse 17 This is a general summary of the widest possible application: *whatever* you do. It echoes a definition of spirituality: what I do to make the Good News come alive in my life (*Nivard Kinsella*). Practical considerations of family life (not included in the short form) follow.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Do the virtues listed speak to me in my life? It may help to be quite concrete.

2. Where in my life do I need to practice forgiveness and love?

3. How would I describe the place of the Word in my life right now?

PRAYER

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

For kindness to a parent will not be forgotten

Sir 3:3 Those who honour their father atone for sins, 4 and those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasure. 5 Those who honour their father will have joy in their own children, and when they pray they will be heard. 6 Those who respect their father will have long life, and those who honour their mother obey the Lord; 7 they will serve their parents as their masters.

Sir 3:14 For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins; 15 in the day of your distress it will be remembered in your favour; like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away. 16 Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord. 17 My child, perform your tasks with humility; then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a very fitting reading for the feast. In the lectionary, the shortened version is quite coherent and makes sense. However, the omitted verses, while somewhat negative, may reflect reality!

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Sirach was written originally in Hebrew and then translated into Greek for the benefit of Jews living in Egypt. The book itself tells us about its production and formation. There is a prologue by Ben Sira's grandson, which introduces the whole book. He goes on to say:

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labor to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.

At the end of the book, there is an autobiographical poem, in which we read:

Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)

The book itself—a late example of biblical Wisdom—may seem conservative. For example, regarding the problem of

evil, it knows nothing of the radical perspective of Job and, frankly, it can be misogynist. On the other hand, it does contain a quite remarkable theology of creation and Wisdom. Some of the very best biblical resources for a theology of creation can be found in this book. See for instance Sir 42:22-43:33. The author's astonishment before creation and the creator is well captured in these words: "We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: 'He is the all.'" (Sir 43:27) This is risky writing and could sound pantheist but he gets away with it because elsewhere the transcendence of God is clearly affirmed.

KIND OF WRITING

Sirach is wisdom instruction, in the form of poetry with plenty of parallelism. In our reading, there isn't much by way of metaphor but there are lots of synonyms for honour and for the marks of old age. V.15—not in the lectionary—contains a striking image of frost melting. The full poem runs to sixteen verses, sensibly abbreviated given the quantity of repetition. There seem to be three stanzas: vv.1-7, 8-11 and 12-16.

RELATED READINGS

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exod 20:12)

Honour your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deut 5:16)

Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (Exod 21:17)

Then Tobit called his son Tobias, and when he came to him he said, "My son, when I die, give me a proper burial. Honour your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do whatever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave. (Tob 4:3-4)

Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your

head, and pendants for your neck." (Prov 1:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 3-4 The parallelism is apparent. Cf. *Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from every disaster.* (Sir 29:11-12)

Verse 5 The first part reflects experience: children learn from their parents how to respect parents.

Verse 6 This echoes the reward attached to honouring parents: Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Ex 20:12; cf. Deut 5:16.) There is a related commandment with a not dissimilar reward (an irony not lost on the rabbis): *If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. Let the mother go, taking only the young for yourself, in order that it may go well with you and you may live long.* (Deut 22:6-7)

Verse 14 The same sentiment is found in v. 3 above.

Verse 15 V. 15b repeats v. 15a, but with a delightful recollection of the warmth of spring causing frost to melt away.

Verse 16 This blunt verse echoes an even more blunt text in Exodus: Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (Ex 21:17)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Is it true that if people "honour" a parent, they have joy in their own children. What do you think the link is? What has your own experience been?

2. The verse about the mind failing is, alas, true in the experience of many. It is a challenge to continue to be loving and sensitive, to stay honouring and showing respect. What has your experience been and what did you learn about yourself?

PRAYER

Great and loving God, you are to us a father and a mother. Help us to continue to love and respect our parents, for in honouring them we honour you, from whom all parenthood takes its name.

We make this prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Ecclesiastes 3:3-7, 14-17; Psalm 128 (127); Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:22-40

READINGS 1 AND 3

Both readings are indeed about family, but in the first the children are obedient and in the Gospel it is the parents!

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 128 (127) makes for a very fitting response. Notice the rich farming metaphors.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ecclesiastes 3:3-7, 14-17

Although embedded in the culture of its day, this reading still speaks because it grounded in human experience.

Second reading

Col 3:12-17 (the shorter version is preferred)

Is anything special expected of disciples or are we satisfied with everyday good? This reading puts it up to us: what's marks me, us, out as Christians?

Gospel

Luke 2:22-40

This warm and affectionate story of family and blessing does not lack hints at the destiny of the child being celebrated.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 1 January

Mary, Mother of God

(See special PDF for the feast)

Tuesday 2 January

Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, Bishops, Doctors

1 John 2:22-28

The reading reflects profound conflict in the community of the Fourth Gospel over Jesus' identity. The tone is more confrontational than usual.

John 1:19-28

John the Baptist was a challenge to early Christians, precisely because John baptised Jesus. In this reading, the evangelist puts on the lips of John himself the word from Isaiah first used by Mark's Gospel.

Wednesday 3 January

The Holy Name of Jesus

1 John 2:29-3:6

Today we hear a justly famous passage, which goes simply and directly to the heart of the matter. The proclamation of the love of God is completed by presenting the consequences for us as believers.

John 1:29-34

What John says of Jesus reflects the understanding of the Fourth Gospel, an understanding which is deep and challenging. Most likely, we are not really hearing the opinion of the historical John the Baptist but the theology of of the evangelist.

Thursday 4 January

1 John 3:7-10

In this reading, the great teaching of the Letter is expressed negatively: anybody not living a holy life and not loving his brother is no child of God's.

John 1:35-42

In John's Gospel, the first first person to talk about Jesus is John the Baptism: Look, there is the lamb of God. These important words have become part of the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Friday 5 January

1 John 3:11-21

Today's reading illustrates the richness of the First Letter. It is highly realistic — the world hates you. At the same time, it is very inspiring — our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active.

John 1:43-51

Our Gospel today contains a large number of descriptions of Jesus. If we were to describe what Jesus means to us, what would we say today? (The mention of the fig tree can puzzle. One explanation goes like this. In rabbinic tradition, it had been concluded that the tree of knowledge of good and evil was a fig tree, given that the fig is the first species mentioned. It became a symbol of the Torah, the later "tree" of knowledge, guidance on the part of goodness. Thus, seeing Philip under

Saturday 6 January

The Epiphany of the Lord

(See special PDF for the feast)

To say "yes" to the Prince of Peace, then, means saying "no" to war; to every war and to do so with courage, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly. This is what war is: an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly. To say "no" to war means saying "no" to weaponry. The human heart is weak and impulsive; if we find instruments of death in our hands, sooner or later we will use them. And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise?

Today, as at the time of Herod, the evil that opposes God's light hatches its plots in the shadows of hypocrisy and concealment. How much violence and killing takes place amid deafening silence, unbeknownst to many! People, who desire not weapons but bread, who struggle to make ends meet and desire only peace, have no idea how many public funds are being spent on arms. Yet that is something they ought to know! It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet-strings of war.

Isaiah, who prophesied the Prince of Peace, looked forward to a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation", a day when men "will not learn war any more", but instead "beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (2:4). With God's help, let us make every effort to work for the coming of that day! May it come in Israel and Palestine, where war is devastating the lives of those peoples. I embrace them all, particularly the Christian communities of Gaza, the parish of Gaza, and the entire Holy Land. My heart grieves for the victims of the abominable attack of 7 October last, and I reiterate my urgent appeal for the liberation of those still being held hostage.

Pope Francis, 25 December 2023