

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Purification, Presentation and Salvation

February 3rd 2019

Feast of the Presentation transferred

Malachi 3.1-5

Luke 2.22-40

Different themes come together in today's Gospel story: to take just three, there are the themes of purification, presentation, and salvation.

The festival we're celebrating used to be known as 'The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary': the parents of Jesus came to the Temple to offer a sacrifice, 40 days after the birth of their son, so that she might be ritually purified from the taint of childbirth, and be able to worship with her people again. It seems ironic, doesn't it, that she who had been worshipping at her son's crib would have been disqualified in the Temple or the synagogue for forty days. But so it was. And although we no longer associate childbirth with taint, well into the Christian era the old idea hung on, and women were considered 'unlucky' until they had gone through the ceremony of 'churching' after the birth of their children. I can remember it happening in my lifetime.

Happily, the liberation of the Gospel from such beliefs finally penetrated our practice, and no purification is deemed necessary after childbirth – only profound thankfulness. But the theme of purification still attaches

to this day in the choice of first reading from Malachi, when the coming of the Lord to his Temple is associated with the kind of judgement which purifies and sets right; *he will sit like a refiner and purifier of silver...and refine them like silver and gold* (Mal. 3.3). It's not ritual taint which the Lord comes to judge and set right: it's unfaithfulness to God and other people, injustice and oppression in society. Today the Lord Jesus comes to his Temple as a tiny baby; later in his life he will come with a whip of cords, and prophesy that he has come to cast fire upon the earth (Luke 12.49). Purification – a part of God's message to us and to our world which isn't to be forgotten.

The second theme I mentioned is that of presentation – of giving back to God what belongs to him by right. For as well as the purification sacrifice of two pigeons, Mary and Joseph would also have had to pay the sum of five shekels in Temple coin, to acknowledge that their first-born belonged to God and was only lent to them. Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, we remember, actually gave her son back to the Lord in the Temple; Mary and Joseph would be taking their son home when they had presented him, but in the knowledge that he was not theirs.

As Christians, we believe that our lives, and those of our children, are not ours, but God's. St Paul, in another reading associated with this festival (Romans 12.1,2), urges us to present ourselves, bodies and minds, as a living sacrifice to the God to whom we really belong - our true and spiritual [lively] worship, the source of transformation in our lives. How much does this theme of presenting ourselves, because we know that we belong to

God, make a significant difference in our lives? How much is it in our minds when we come to worship?

The third theme I have mentioned is salvation – the gift discerned by Simeon and Anna in the form of a tiny child: God’s consolation for his waiting and watching people, a light not just for the chosen people, but for the very ends of the earth.

We come before God to seek our purification, our transformation. We present ourselves to him, to be a living sacrifice, because we know we belong to him and through us he may do something for the world which so badly needs his presence. But we also come to rejoice in his salvation, knowing that it comes not without pain or contradiction – and yet it comes. It is a real gift. Where the world seems to be in such a mess and turmoil, where suffering seems to be so real, and conflict so deep, nevertheless, salvation is there to be hoped for, prayed for, and recognised -in this life, glimpses, maybe, in surprising places and faces - in the middle of the crowding turbulence of other things, - and yet portending the final coming of the great Light.

Can we be like Simeon and Anna, and make this our song?

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