

## **Luke 2:21-38**

Today's Gospel for the first Sunday of Christmas defines Jesus further - a child though the Son of God - clearly possessing flesh and blood human attributes - no figment of our imagination.

The story of Jesus' presentation in Jerusalem is one of the few stories in the canonical gospels that has to do with Jesus' childhood. The scarcity of information about Jesus' childhood reminds us that the gospels are not primarily biographies. They are kerygmatic narratives - that is they seek to proclaim the gospel and to undergird and strengthen faith in Christ. It is clear that Luke's childhood stories are used to make theological points: Jesus was born a Jew among Jews. He was subject to the law of Moses. And although he fulfilled the law in honouring his father and mother, his ultimate obedience was to his heavenly Father.

Luke describes events for the child Jesus, and his family, as unfolding in keeping the traditions of the law. Set against the hospitality extended to the couple when they arrived in Bethlehem, this visit to the Temple serves as another witness to the presence of the peace of God. Having experienced welcome and reception by their community of descendants of David, Mary and Joseph obediently respond as children of God who are as comfortable in the

House of God as they have been made to feel in the guest room of the home of their distant relatives.

It is now forty days since Jesus' birth. After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law. Now, thirty-two days later, his parents are once again performing their duty as pious Jews by returning to the Temple, this time in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to God. According to Leviticus, after a woman gives birth to a son, she is impure for forty days. At the end of that period, she is to bring an offering to the temple, which the priest offers as a sacrifice, effecting her purification.

The profound act of consecration sets the child apart, first as a Jew, and then as an individual within society. Jesus was also presented as first-born by Joseph, and according to the law of Moses, Joseph had to pay the required five shekels. The law states that every first-born male (which "opens the womb"), whether human or animal, "belongs" to the Lord.

Luke has taken this old idea of the first-born son being dedicated to God's service and made it fruitful for his narrative. The Torah has no specific requirement that the first-born son be presented **at the Temple**. However, Luke alludes to the story of Samuel, which we read back in October. When

Hannah, who had no children, prayed to God for a son, she vowed that if she had a son, she would give him to God. So after Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple, and he was “lent” to God for life. It is clear that Mary in Luke’s story, takes the role of Hannah while Jesus takes the role of Samuel. So, when Joseph and Mary present Jesus to the Lord in Jerusalem, they are in effect dedicating his life to God. Jesus will be “holy to the Lord.” With these words, Luke subtly alters the language of Exodus from a command to consecrate the first-born to God to a declaration about Jesus. Luke’s working is reminiscent of the angel Gabriel telling Mary that her son will be “holy” and will be called the “Son of God,” because he will be conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph and Mary must have been in a solemn mood that day, full of reverence and expectancy, the way many parents are when their first child is to be baptized. It’s not hard to imagine the quiet procession they must have made to the great Temple, their awe at entering the holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared to sacrifice according to the law. Nor is it difficult to imagine their reaction as an old man comes forward out of the shadows to scoop up their child into his arms and prophesy about him, right after the Rite of Purification was completed - including the required sacrifice of two turtle doves by those who could not afford a lamb.

Luke's description of Jesus' presentation leaves an indelible tableau in our mind's eye. Four adults are part of the scene, eager to see this child launched with due ceremony and love. We can almost see them posed on the front steps of the Temple! They are proud, happy, and awed by this child. Along with Jesus' parents there are two other adults of deep piety, Simeon and Anna, who respond to the occasion. These two devout and faithful people are recorded as praising God. God has granted them the opportunity to witness the arrival of an infant whom they understand to be the central change agent for the cosmos.

Simeon, a name meaning "sign," noted the child's presence in the courtyard. Simeon was a righteous and devout man. He had practised strict adherence to the Law. Taking his faith very seriously and looking after his spiritual condition, he was seen as one who walked constantly with God by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this capacity, his prophetic statements were profoundly revered. Through him, the announcement came that the Light of God's love had arrived. Jesus, a child already born and given to Israel, was prophetically, according to Simeon, to expand faith into the Gentile nations. Through the Messiah then, Israel would attain its true and highest glory.

The prophecy of Simeon, often read or spoken in the infant Christian household churches of Luke's day, reinforced the acceptance of Greeks,

Romans, and other peoples into the faith community. These persons were solidly anchored by Luke's writing as participants in the mission of the church. They participated in the receiving of "holy things for holy people."

Joseph and Mary marvelled at what was said by Simeon. But after blessing them, he gave Mary a warning as he revealed more of the child's Messianic role. "This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul."

Startled at first, perhaps, even a bit frightened by the old Man's ecstatic face, Mary and Joseph yield to him because they sense the Lord's Spirit upon him. Hearing Simeon's prophecy, they are reminded of the events of the previous weeks and months when angels and shepherds had intruded into their lives to foretell the greatness of their son.

How puzzled they must have been, at what we now call 'Simeon's song:' "Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Saviour you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Expressing Simeon's pious thanksgiving to God for the Christ child and his earnest plea for peace, his song has become

one of the most familiar and beautiful hymns of liturgy. Beautiful words, but also troubling when Simeon asks that he be allowed to go, allowed to finally die.

However, Luke is clear that Simeon is able to speak of death so honestly only in the light of the coming of the promised Messiah, only, that is, by the confidence that in this helpless child, God has come to redeem Israel and save the world. Simeon perceives that, in the Christ-child, God has kept God's promises; that in this babe, set for the rising and fall of many, God has acted once and for all to address the question and spectre of death with the promise of life.

And so Simeon does not actually ask for death; rather he accepts it courageously and confidently in the light of God's promised salvation. And he does so, only upon seeing and holding God's promise in his own hands, only after holding the child, and touching and feeling the promise of life which God granted to him through Christ ... and which God grants to us.

Luke continues his story with the introduction of the elderly prophetess Anna. Anna's description picks up this anticipation of disruption. Her constant state of fasting identifies her as one in a state of mourning, not for her husband, but for the people of God. However, seeing the child, her mourning

turns to praise! God has come to bring about the return of God's people from Roman oppression.

Anna announced the child Jesus to all who were with her within that courtyard. This was not a public broadcast with the intention of informing the temple authorities. The words were spoken to the pious ones who had prayed daily with her in the courtyard. It was especially those lowly ones who had long waited with her for the Messiah.

At the centre of this is the child. He is mentioned by name only once. Elsewhere he is always referred to as "the child." Substantial words spoken about someone so very small. But Luke has been playing on the contrast throughout the birth story. The saviour of the world is born among the animals and laid to sleep in a feeding trough, while another 'saviour' of the world - Caesar Augustus - sits on a throne in Roman splendour. In striking contrast, Jesus' parents bring the offering designated for the poor; two turtle doves. It is this child born in poverty who is the true saviour. He is the sign of God's consolation and redemption. We are left in anticipation to watch as the child grows strong, filled with wisdom and blessed with the favour of God.

This first Sunday of Christmas is all about praise. Maybe praise is the only response. There are no more gifts to buy, no more meals to prepare, no

more gifts to wrap. All that is left is response. Jesus is presented in the temple and Simeon and Anna respond. They are our post-Christmas models. When we have nothing left, all that is left is praise. And maybe all that we need, all that God needs is praise.

So, when we stop, ponder, consider: all that God wants, all that God needs, all that we need - we are simply left with these words: "Wow, God, I don't know what else to say, I just cannot find the right words. All I know to do is sing."

Because that's exactly what benedictions like Simeon's do. They just sing. They praise. No motive. No agenda. No plan. Just relish the moment. Be in the moment. Praise the moment that God showed up. We just don't do that often enough.

We give praise in the face of perverse power. We give praise so as to offer resistance to that which or those who would seek to instill fear instead of trust. We give praise to shout out an alternate perspective/reality/worldview that chooses love and inclusion and compassion over hatred and exclusion and heartlessness. We give praise to affirm our belief that the world can be different, that the world has to be different, and that that difference is known in bringing about the kingdom of God here and now.



We desperately need Anna and Simeon this week. We need them to help us utter the praise of God that simultaneously responds to God's presence and resists the presence of evil. We need them to model the reaction to the convergence of waiting and fulfillment. We need them to give us the courage to trust in our God who is indeed present and powerful when the world in which we live suggests otherwise.

Amen.