

2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*The Presentation of our Lord in the Temple* took place because Mary, Joseph and Jesus were Jews, and it was expected ---- a hallowed custom --- in recognition of the birth of a boy. Jesus was circumcised eight (8) days after his birth. Thirty-two (32) days later, a sacrifice was made in his name, and the child was consecrated to the Lord God in the Temple in Jerusalem. What this represented was “the deliverance of the people of Israel through the final plague in Egypt --- the death of the first born.” But from that point onward into the future, these children would be redeemed in the Temple through the simple act of offering a gift of money or a live animal for sacrifice.

The depiction of this event in Luke’s gospel actually reflects his fairly conservative view of things. He wants to show that Jesus did not intend to set the Law or the Prophets aside or found a new religion. He is emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus and his family. He’s demonstrating that ritual remained important to practicing Jews and Jesus was upholding that tradition. Ethical rules were not sufficient for those who claimed to be part of the people of Israel, because Jews also placed a high value on religious purity which was governed by strict rules. Luke is emphasizing continuity, continuity between traditional belief and practice and belief and practice in the New Testament period. Jesus was continuing a tradition, albeit in modified form, but he did not break with it.

It is only in Luke that we also find the lovely canticles which pass down to us the story of Jesus in such a memorable way. The *Magnificat* of Mary, for example, and in today’s lectionary reading --- the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon. These were likely poetic or musical compositions dating back to the period immediately after the Day of Pentecost, and they were being preserved through oral tradition in a period when literacy was quite limited. Today, the *Nunc Dimittis* which refers to the words of Simeon in the Vulgate or Latin version of the New Testament (“*Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace*”... the Latin words NOW and DISMISS being emphasized in the title) continues to hold a special place in the hearts of practicing Christians. In our prayer book, it is a traditional part of Compline, and the Morning and Evening Prayer daily offices.

It is also found in both Roman Catholic and Lutheran services of Compline as well as in Eastern Orthodox Vespers. In music, it has been an inspiration for composers, and because of our very strong musical tradition and our commitment to the regular reading of scripture, it holds a special place in Anglican worship.

According to the story, Simeon was a devout Jew who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. He witnessed the consecration ceremony in the Temple

and then took the child into his arms and uttered the famous words addressed to God in the *Nunc Dimittis* canticle (“my eyes have seen your salvation....a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”).

The conservative approach of Luke is also found here in that Simeon and Anna, an elderly prophetess, are “true spirits of Israel.” These two devout Jewish characters are “portraits of the Israel that accepted Jesus.” We do not know precisely why Luke was so intent on emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus, but it would make sense if it had shaped by the attitudes of the audience for whom he was writing. It may also have been viewed as necessary in the context of the times out of concern for how the followers of Jesus were to be viewed by the Roman authorities; traditional Jews for some time had been granted a special dispensation to practice their religion in a pagan culture, in part out of general regard for their long tradition and the ethical nature of Jewish belief.

Luke uses the passage skillfully to make several theological statements. First, this is taking place in the Temple, “the locus of Jewish devotion.” Jews believed God truly dwelt within its walls. By holding the Presentation there, Luke not only shows Jesus as the possession of the Father, he also sees Jesus in the Temple “as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: Jesus is the future king and priest of Israel, the Anointed One. But he also uses the occasion to tell the reader or listener through the voice of Simeon that the birth of the Christ-child will not be pleasing to everyone. The kind of Messiah Jesus was destined to be would be a scandal to many and would challenge their faith because in the tradition of their ancient scriptures a different kind of Savior had grown to be expected.

This birth is going to bring joy but also division and strife; and the opposition to Jesus would reveal the true intent of his enemies. While it brought joy to Simeon and Anna, it would cause Mary deep pain.

Beyond this, the passage acquaints us with the kind of people Jesus had come to rescue and with whom he associated in his ministry: the underclass, the largest majority of people living in Palestine in the first century, including the poor Jewish couple, Simeon and Anna. Simeon appears to live day-by-day. Anna is nearly homeless as a widow without any resources to fall back upon. Nevertheless, she acts here as a religious icon providing a social critique. And Simeon speaks truth as well as expressing joy over the birth of the Christ-child.

But we can also see here *who isn’t in the picture*: priests or other Temple officials. “Steeped in money and privilege, these Sadducees would later oppose Jesus in his Temple ministry. In their absence from the scene, Luke emphasized God’s presence with the common people.” The aristocrats were not needed to mediate between the people and God. The Christ-child himself would grow up to be the mediator.

It would be an easy thing to take from the famous canticle of Simeon an overly rosy view of the world from the vantage point of a holy man in his final days on earth welcoming God’s gift of the Messiah. This is because although the Temple scene recalled a time “when life seemed safe, traditions were

observed, and Joseph and Mary could safely negotiate registering in a Roman census,” the reality is that Luke is writing *after* the destruction of the Temple.

So, the subject of the Temple itself also recalls for the readers and listeners to Luke’s story a recent and devastating catastrophe for the people of God. This combination of joy and danger, happiness and grief, is also demonstrated by the very fact of the Christ-child being born in a stable “while another savior of the world, Caesar, sits on a throne in Roman splendor.” The contrast is intentional. The offering in the Temple in honor of Jesus was that of very poor people: two turtledoves was all they could afford,” but we learn from this “the lowliness of Jesus’ family and their marginalized position in society.” Yet even here in a place of extreme poverty, “what seems most evident is *hope* itself”. After all, it is the child born in poverty “who is the true savior.”

What we witness in this scene underscores the faithfulness of Jesus’ family and their orthodox upbringing of the child. The perspective provided by this experience of devotion is such that it serves as a “context for the critique Jesus later lays against religious practices that undermine love of God and neighbor.” The tension Jesus later has with the Law “is never that of the outsider, but that of one who has faithfully observed the divine expectations. Practices of the Law that subvert God’s command to love are unacceptable...and Jesus repeatedly condemns those who attempt to flaunt their holiness before God without hospitality toward neighbor.”

And all of this we discover in a very short passage from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel account, demonstrating once again the extraordinary gifts of the gospel writers to convey spiritual truth in imaginative and memorable ways. In the end, despite the existence of other accounts of the life of Jesus, only four survive as part of the canon of New Testament books. The leaders of the early church who made that choice were not only steeped in the tradition but only a generation away from the disciples themselves.

**Almighty and ever-living God, we humbly pray that, as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Amen**

(Sources: Richard Neill Donovan, “Biblical Commentary Luke 2: 22-40,” <https://sermonwriter.com>, Stephen Hultgren, “Commentary on Luke 2: 22-40,” 2014, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), excerpts from David Lose, Karoline Lewis, William Loader, Brian Stoffregen, “Luke 2: 22-40 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Christmas Year B,” *Exegetical Notes*, [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com), “*Nunc Dimittis*,” Wikipedia, N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, London, 2001, Joy J. Moore, “RCL Commentary on Luke 2: 22-40,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Holly Hearon, “RCL Commentary on Luke 2: 22-40,” 2008, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), Larry Broding, [www.word-study.com](http://www.word-study.com), “Luke: Jesus grew in wisdom and stature,” [www.lectionarystudies.com](http://www.lectionarystudies.com), *Pumpkin Cottage Ministry Resources*)