

Sermon notes from CMJ
The Presentation of Our Lord - Year B

Readings - Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84; Luke 2:22-40

Introduction: In the midst of the Epiphany season, The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (Feb 2) brings Christmas to a seasonal conclusion. It is unfortunate that this feast is so ignored because those who hold the humanity of the Messiah to be essential have no choice but to take the Jewish context of the Gospel with the utmost seriousness. It is our Jewish roots (most prominent in this feast) that nurture us spiritually and in part shapes our identities as followers of Jesus.

Common Theme: The temple of God, from where His presence extended throughout Israel and to all the earth. The temple was the center of ritual purity and holiness and the place of revelation and the teaching of Torah. It should not be surprising that the gospel of Luke begins and ends in the temple and it is there God's promises to Israel and the nations are confirmed in the person of Jesus. Just as God is faithful, Simeon, Anna, the parents of Jesus and others found in Luke's birth stories are also identified as being faithful to the Scripture and full of the Spirit.

Hebraic Perspective: Care should be taken not to spiritualize and to substitute the heavenly Jerusalem for the earthly one. Rather than say all is "fulfilled in Christ," we should consider what we can learn from authentic temple piety: sacrifice, joy in pilgrimage, generosity and most of all - the need for holiness in life and worship.

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-4 - This passage helps give a context to the story of Anna and Simeon in the Jerusalem temple. Jews in the Second Temple Period understood that the temple would be where the Messiah would make an appearance. "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal 3:1). Others expected the messianic appearance in the wilderness: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD" (Isa 40:3). Malachi (chaps. 3-4) provides a job description of the "coming one." In this passage the messianic task will bring judgement – that great and terrible Day of the Lord – and the connection between the "coming one" and "judgment" influenced messianic expectations. When John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the "one who comes" (Matt 11:3), it should be understood that John is asking if he is the one who will cast fire on the earth and bring judgement. Although He will ultimately return as a judge, Jesus rebukes John and defines his current mission in terms of healing, restoration, and good news for the poor.

Second Reading: Psalm 84 - Preaching this psalm allows the opportunity to describe the centrality of pilgrimage and temple worship for biblical Israel. Care should be taken not to spiritualize and to substitute the heavenly Jerusalem for the earthly one. Another temptation might be to declare that all is "fulfilled in Christ" and that we have little to learn from authentic temple piety. A good entry into Psalm 84 would be to talk about the joy of being in God's presence and the ways that worshippers in biblical times prepared themselves to appear before the Lord by chanting the Psalms of Ascent (120-134). As Karl Barth once said, joy is the simplest form of gratitude. Worshippers were further expected to approach the sanctuary in holiness, never an end in itself, but as a way to gain access to a holy God. Biblical holiness was not an abstract theological concept but rather concrete practices that included an ethical lifestyle, clean hands and pure hearts (Ps 24:3-4), not engaging in corruption, and keeping promises (Ps 15:1-5). Further, pilgrims could not come before the Lord empty handed but were to bring gifts according to their means (Deut 16:16-17). God surely had no need of doves, goats or bulls, but it was through sacrifice (*korban* קָרְבָּן) that Israel and God could draw near (*karov* קָרַב) through a reciprocal relationship of giving (note the Hebrew root connection קָרַב, to approach.) God gave Israel life and entered into covenant with her as with no other nation (Ps 82). Israel responds by giving

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something valuable and holy (without spot or blemish) in return. The gifts were not to be considered as payment, but rather a tangible way of expressing gratitude.

Third Reading: Luke 2:22-40 - The focal point of this reading and much of Luke's birth narrative (40 percent) occurs in the Jerusalem temple. It is there that Luke's story of Jesus begins and ends. This setting reminds us that the temple was God's house and from there His presence extended throughout Israel and all the earth. Further, it was the center of ritual purity and holiness (not to be conflated), the place of revelation and the teaching of Torah. If, as some claim, God's presence no longer inhabited the temple after the Babylonian exile, why does it play such a crucial role in Luke's gospel?

The close connection of the Holy Family with the temple serves to highlight their piety and love for the Torah. Five times in Luke 2 it mentions their obedience to the Torah. As historian Channa Safrai pointed out, the love for God's commandments by Jesus' parents was such that they went beyond what was expected. According to the common custom of the day women often waited until they had several children before going to the temple to offer a purification sacrifice. Yet Mary and Joseph performed this rite without delay. Further, Safrai says their love for Jerusalem and the temple is shown by a yearly pilgrimage. The journey from Galilee was dangerous and expensive, and most families in that region went only once or twice during a lifetime. Perhaps this was Luke's way of reassuring the reader of Mary's honor despite the unusual events surrounding her pregnancy. In any event, we often fail to consider the way Jesus' character was shaped by godly parents.

Luke introduces us to Anna and Simeon (a common Lukan practice of twinning a male and female figure), and like others we meet in Luke's narrative, they were pious on whom the Spirit rested. Simeon paraphrases Isaiah (Luke 2:29-32) by declaring Jesus to be the salvation prepared in the sight of all nations, a light to the nations and the glory of Israel (Isa 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6).

So, the prophets understood that salvation would be universal, but there was a problem. God's people did not accept His redemption. As noted by David Flusser, the redemptive pattern so prevalent in the prophets is a divine cycle of exile and return, tragedy then redemption. Some commentators, such as David Tiede, see the phrase "the fall and rise of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34) as an order of events anticipating Israel's initial rejection of Jesus then ultimate reconciliation with God's foreordained Redeemer.

Messianic Jewish scholar Mark Kinzer observes, "The disciples do not initially understand the role that the cross plays in Yeshua's work 'to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). In order to 'rise' Yeshua himself had to 'fall.' It appears that Jerusalem must walk the same course." In this Gospel, two glimpses of Israel's redemption (among others) are seen when Jesus enters Jerusalem and predicts he will not return until the city welcomes him in the name of the Lord (Luke 13:35), and until the time of the Gentiles comes to an end (Luke 24:21). Of course, the question of Israel's rejection of Jesus and God's continual faithfulness to his people is most notably taken up by Paul in Romans 11.

Further Reading: Safrai, Chana. "Jesus' Jewish Parents." *Jerusalem Perspective*, September 1, 1992.
Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. Eerdmans, 1997.

Kinzer, Mark S. *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen: The Resurrected Messiah, the Jewish People, and the Land of Promise*. Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018.

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about the Jewish context of their faith. He has an M.A. from the Hebrew University in Jewish Studies and is a licensed tour guide. Fascinated by Eastern European Jewish life that existed before the Second World War, he has led countless trips to Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic, designed to teach Christians about the Holocaust and Jewish life in the modern era. Ordained by Archbishop Henry Orombi of Uganda, he has been the rector of Christ Church Jerusalem since 2008. He also takes a keen interest in the Isaiah 19 Movement and the rights of the Christian minority in Israel.