

## **Year C Presentation to the LORD in the Temple**

Malachi 3: 1-4

Hebrews 2: 14-18

Luke 2:22-40

### **Law? Conforming to the nature and will of God**

As some of you will know, I love this story of Jesus being presented in the Temple. I love the deep faith of Simeon, who was so confident in God's word to him; so confident that even as an old man, a man getting more feeble and frail as the days, months and years went by, he never doubted that he would see the Messiah before he died. What faith!

Today we are celebrating the Feast Day that has three different names.

- ✚ The Presentation of the Lord in the Temple
- ✚ The Purification of Mary, and
- ✚ Candlemas

To help us understand the first two titles we need to step back and consider what led to this meeting in the Temple precincts.

The opening words of our Gospel reading say. 'When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.'

Firstly, let us consider the title, 'The Purification of Mary', a title that doesn't appear as a title in our church's Calendar but was common at one time.

Leviticus chapters 11-15 give instructions on how to keep pure or clean, rather than impure or taboo; taboo meaning something that is mysterious, worrying or off-limits in some way. It also set out what actions were required for someone to regain their 'pure' status. The list of things that made one impure included childbirth, menstruation, emission of semen, contact with a corpse, etc.

Specifically in Leviticus chapter 12:1-5, it states that a woman is rendered unclean through childbirth. If the woman had given birth to a boy she would

wasn't allowed to enter the meeting place or Temple for forty days. If she had given birth to a girl the amount of time she was unclean was double, at 80 days! How's that for sex equality?

So, Mary wasn't allowed to enter the Temple for forty days after the birth of Jesus. Only then, with a sacrifice of a lamb, or for the poor, two turtle doves offered to the priest at the entrance, one for a burnt offering (a gift of commitment to God) and one for a sin offering, was she re-admitted as clean to the Temple.

Next we come to the first name for the today's festival, 'The Presentation of the Lord in the Temple'. This practice refers to the story in 1 Samuel 1:22, where Hannah says she will wean the child named Samuel and then bring him to the temple, to 'appear in the presence of the Lord'. It also relates to Exodus 13. In verse 2 God instructs Moses, 'Consecrate to me all the firstborn' and in verse 12 continues his instructions, 'you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb' and in verse 13 continues, 'every first-born male among your children you shall redeem'.

The Jews would have had to follow these laws, and as we have read in the Gospel reading, Mary and Joseph as observant and faithful Jews, adhered to the obligations of their faith; they did their best to followed its laws.

Many theologians have explored why the Jews developed and adhered to all the laws and regulations contained in the first five books of the Bible, with most in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, but also scattered throughout Exodus. There is considerable unanimity that their purpose was to keep the descendants of Jacob/Israel distinctive and completely separate from all the other tribes occupying land in the ancient near east.

The laws and requirements are not related to hygiene issues because if they were then many other hygienic practices and ways of avoiding disease would have been listed. Leviticus 11:44-45 and 20:24-26 give clear indications that the purpose was for the Jews to be a distinctive and separate tribe. The laws related to their God and required the people to be morally and religiously righteous, so demanding a different style of living from those who did not worship their God. We should also note that some of the laws in Leviticus related solely to the priests.

To state the obvious, the Christian faith grew out of the Jewish faith as we all know. We have to look to the teachings and sayings of Jesus to understand why the laws, the requirements and obligations of the Jews either should be followed in our times or not.

When I was pondering this, the words of Jesus that immediately came to my mind were from Matthew 5:17 when Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil the Law.' So then, why don't we keep all those inconvenient Jewish laws to this day? On the surface it does seem as if Jesus is saying we need to still comply with them, or does it?

Of course, as I have said many a time, it can be misleading to pluck a verse out of the Bible and not read it in its context. Matthew Chapter 5 starts with the Beatitudes, the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount describes how people who have chosen to follow God and wish to be part of his kingdom are to live out their lives. The sermon contains ethical requirements to guide and direct those who desire to please God. Jesus tells those who have chosen this new life that they are 'salt of the earth'; salt that permeates and preserves, holding back decay, moral and ethical decay that is. In verse 17 Jesus clearly states he hasn't come to abolish the Law. But he is saying that by word and deed he intends to bring out the quality of life the Laws and Prophets intended to produce but had failed to achieve. Jesus was going to fulfil the Law by setting out the divine intent for all people and ensure they were still part of God's revelation given to Moses for Israel to be God's people.

Jesus knew that after that revelation to Moses more and more laws and requirements has been developed and written down as part of the codes for the Jews to follow. They became so hard to keep that a special group of lay people, the Pharisees<sup>1</sup>, were created. They worked to separate themselves from all that would defile them in order to meet all of the requirements of the Law and Prophets and the later developments of the teachers of the law. Jesus saw the ridiculous situation for what it was; knowing that ordinary people could not keep the laws and that so much of it was about external behaviour, not what was in the heart. As we know Jesus was critical of the Pharisees.

To Jews the Law was an expression of the nature of God, so to keep the laws was to conform to the nature and will of God. Jesus knew this, but as part of

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from the Hebrew word 'paras', which means 'apart'

his ministry he knew it was time to move from the external conformity that originated after Moses received the first Laws, to a much deeper and transformational way of being. Jesus was stating that those Laws, the Torah, was not God's last word to God's people, and it was now time, with the Messiah in their presence, to look to a time of fulfilment which was now available to them. The people no longer needed to look to the Law and the prophets. They were to look to Jesus and his disciples to determine the right way to live, to follow the teaching and practices of Jesus.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus is stating that he is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, and they should follow his teachings to live in right relationship with God.

We also get further confirmation of this in Acts chapter 10: the barriers between Jews and Gentiles are to be broken down, so they can share meals, hospitality and fellowship together.

For these reasons, sound reasons based on the words and actions of Jesus, and the practical implications of these as seen played out in the followers of Christ after Pentecost in bringing Jews and gentiles together to share food and hospitality, all of the Laws and requirements of the Old Testament were swept away.

What are we left with, are the teachings and practices of Jesus, as summarised in his new commandment, to love your neighbour as yourself. There is a good reason why we hear the Summary of the Law at the beginning of our service.

It follows that as Christians you can come to church as soon as you want after childbirth. You can wear cloth of wool and cotton or other mixed fabrics without fear of getting killed, you can eat pork and you don't need to abide by over 600 other laws either in working out how to live in order to conform to the nature and will of God.

If anyone tries to tell you that God doesn't allow something and then quotes one of the laws from Leviticus, from Exodus or other parts of the Old Testament, you can gently point them to the teachings of Jesus, who tells us that he is the fulfilment of the Law.

For ourselves, if we do our best to live a life in accordance with the teachings of Jesus and adhere to his new commandment, then we are conforming to the nature and will of God.

On this festival of Candlemas, the third title for today's celebrations, where we recognise Christ as the light of the world, Christ calls us to be little sparks of light in our own communities, bringing light into the lives of others.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, we give thanks for the faithful lives of Simeon and Anna. We give thanks for all who are faithful to your Word and seek to do your will. Help us follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus, and follow his new commandment.

Guide and lead us to love one another, showing toleration, grace and mercy especially when we feel tested by another's behaviour.

Everyone is made in your image, Lord. Help us to see this and to see the good in all whom we meet.

Inspire and enable us to be a light and blessing to others

In Jesus' name we pray.

**Amen.**

## **Background Information**

### **What Is in the Book of Leviticus?**

We have to dig back into the Jewish Laws and Prophets to understand the requirements mentioned at the beginning of today's gospel.

Leviticus chapters 1 to 7 outline the procedures for making five types of offering to God.

- ✚ Burnt or Whole offering: the entire animal is burnt, it is a gift of commitment to God.
- ✚ Grain offering: a gift to God normally alongside another form of sacrifice, shared with God and the person who offered it.
- ✚ Well-being or Fellowship offering: shared between the offerer and God, some of it was burnt, whilst some of it is cooked so it can be eaten in God's presence. This sacrifice expresses fellowship and peace (shalom) with God and between offerers. It is normally a sacrifice given in thanksgiving, or when a promise has been fulfilled that a person made to God, or just as a gesture of love for God.
- ✚ Purification or sin offering: this enabled someone to gain purification with regard to some stain, either a moral or a ceremonial stain.
- ✚ Reparation offering: also called a guilt offering, which would normally include financial reparation for a wrong committed.

Sources for the sermon and the Appendix:

France, R.T. (2007) *'The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew'* pages 181-184

Goldingay, J. (2018) *'An Introduction to the Old Testament: Exploring Text, Approaches and Issues'* pages 106-108.

Mounce, R.H. (1991) *'New International Biblical Commentary: Matthew'* pages 37-51