

**February 2<sup>nd</sup>: Jesus' Presentation in the Temple: he is 'given up' to God.**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Malachi 3:1-4: God's messenger will appear, to prepare a way;**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Hebrews 2:14-18: Jesus could help us because he was human;**  
**Gospel: Luke 2:22-40: Jesus is presented; he is also 'Light for the Gentiles'.**

This weekend, we have one of those big feasts that 'knock out' the usual Sunday liturgy: the occasion of Jesus' being 'presented' in the Jerusalem Temple at 40 days old. This was a Jewish custom: when a mother's first child was male, he was seen as the 'first fruits' of the marriage and so was offered to God as a sort of sacrifice – then immediately 'bought back' by offering a pair of turtle doves (or pigeons, if the family was poor). It was purely symbolic, since Jews loathed the idea of human sacrifice: it had been common in surrounding nations. At the same time, the parents (especially the mother) were "purified". This was not a moral forgiveness of sin, but a ritual affair: in ancient culture, the bloody nature of childbirth was seen as somehow 'unclean' (as were a woman's periods) and so the mother had to be 'cleansed' to re-enter society. A different world view!

However, I think we should begin with the other two readings, which both have references to the Jews' Jerusalem Temple (where Jesus was eventually presented). The first is from the Old Testament prophetic book Malachi, written about 450BC. The title is not a person, but a job, as 'Malachi' means 'my messenger'. Here, the 'message' was that God would once again make people morally fit, by some sort of divine intervention in history. This improvement would apply especially to Israel's priesthood & public worship. The writer refers to God "*suddenly coming to his Temple*". I won't bore you with detail, but early Christians probably saw this to refer to the baby Jesus being presented there.

The 2nd reading is from Hebrews, a New Testament book aimed at former Jewish Temple-priests who had become Christians. The language is shot-through with references to Jerusalem Temple-worship (which had been their daily job before conversion). The writer sees Jesus as "*a merciful and faithful high priest in the sight of God*", but to do us any good, he also had to be truly human, in that he "*suffered when tempted, thus was able to help those who are being tempted.*" We are reminded of Jesus' humanity, as there has often been a tension between the divine and human 'sides' to Jesus' life. The contents of Hebrews have always been seen as a basis for the RC Church's theology of Christian priesthood.

We return to the gospel, clearly the main reading this weekend. In one sense, it is Luke's equivalent of Matthew's Epiphany story: although much less colourful, it still shows some important aspects of Jesus' future work. Apart from Jesus, Mary & Joseph, the main character is the inspired, elderly man Simeon. Luke says that the Holy Spirit caused him to be there at the time Jesus was

presented. Simeon was aware of the baby's importance: he had had a feeling that he *"would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ"*. As he took the child in his arms, he knew that his ambition had now been fulfilled, so he said the famous prayer that (in the Latin version) came to be called the "Nunc Dimittis": *"Now you are letting your servant depart in peace....for my eyes have seen your salvation.....a light for the revelation of the Gentiles, and for glory to your people, Israel"*. He believed the child to be *"salvation"* – the sort of divine intervention that the book of Malachi had predicted centuries earlier. He would be the glory of the Jewish religion, but also *"a light for the revelation of the Gentiles"*. That sort of generous 'ecumenical' aspect of Christian work was missing in the closed-in Jewish world of Malachi. The idea of Jesus as the "Light of the World" was to become a major theme of St John in the fourth gospel.

The shorter version stops at that point, but the fuller version goes on to mention Simeon's warning to Mary: *"This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against – and a sword will pierce through your own soul also..."* Those words have been seen as a warning of Mary's future sorrow, but also of the child's controversial future: *"a sign that is spoken against"* implied that he would inevitably meet opposition. How people chose would cause the "falling and rising" of many in Israel – a phrase I find puzzling. One idea is that all (including the people of Israel) would be judged by their choices, and they would know in themselves whether they had 'fallen' or 'risen' morally by what they had decided. (That is one suggestion, anyway....)

Before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council changes of the 1960's, this feast was called by two other names, emphasizing different things. One was "The Purification", which stressed the Old Testament idea of Mary being 'unclean' by the birth process. The other, "Candlemas Day", referred to the lighting of candles at Mass, as a reminder that Simeon called Jesus "The Light of the Gentiles". In some places, everyone in the church lights a candle for the first part of Mass.

What does this feast mean now? I fear that it is so steeped in Old Testament language & style that it may seem cute, but irrelevant to modern life. However, two ideas in the story may strike a chord. One is "The Light of the Gentiles". These were people outside the Jewish faith. Perhaps you and I could be a 'light' to those outside our Church circle – not by forcing religion on them at the one extreme, nor by being embarrassed about it at the other - just by letting them see how faith helps us. The other idea is the 'sword piercing Mary's soul': many have serious personal troubles (sometimes caused by their faith). The least we can do is to let them air their problems, and if possible, offer practical help. That would be our equivalent of Simeon blessing Mary & Joseph. *Fr Jim Dunne.*