

Purification

28 1 18

Almighty and ever living God,
clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son
was this day presented in the Temple
in the substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you
with pure and clean hearts,
by your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Luke chapter 2 and verse 22:

'When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses'

In our Christian calendar, the season of Epiphany comes to an end on February 2nd and, from then on, we can look forward to Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday, this year, February 14th. Because, this year, February 2nd falls on a Tuesday, we can transfer the day to the nearest Sunday, which is today, January 28th.

Oddly enough, the day itself has three titles. The one we use mostly is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the day when baby Jesus, forty days old, is taken by Mary and Joseph up to Jerusalem in order to make the required sacrifice for the birth of a first-born son – two turtle doves.

A second title for the day is Candlemas, so called because traditionally it was the Sunday on which the candles to be burnt in church during that year were blessed.

The third is a title rarely used nowadays – the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Now, if Mary is, by definition, pure then why on earth should she be in need of purification? And the answer is rooted in the Old Testament, in the Torah, the 613 commandments which informed the religious life of good, God-fearing Jews. So let me quote the opening verses of Leviticus 12 for our better understanding: *If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.*

It is surprising and interesting to see this window onto a past way of making sense of bodily purity and impurity. As you know, Jews consider contact with blood renders someone impure. Kosher food necessarily removes excess blood from meat. The flow of menstrual blood during her period renders a woman impure. The flow of blood at the time of giving birth likewise renders a woman impure. Now, of course, we as Christians do not make sense of life in the same way though, of course, we do want to be washed clean from sin, to be pure in heart, to be free from the taint of wrong-doing. But you can now see why the Presentation of Christ at the temple took place when Jesus was 40 days old: 7 days of Mary being ceremonially unclean followed by 33 days of her purification = 40.

In the Book of Common Prayer, there was a service called ‘The Thanksgiving of women after childbirth commonly called the churching of women.’ Just three pages long, the essence is summed up in the final collect or prayer which here I quote: ‘O Almighty God we give thee humble thanks for that thou hast vouchsafed to deliver this woman thy servant from the great pains and peril of child-birth: Grant, we beseech thee, most merciful Father, that she through thy help may both faithfully live and walk according to thy will, in this life present; and also may be partaker of everlasting glory in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

No reference to purification in the service – more an acknowledgement of the fact that childbirth is truly labour and that there is inherent possible danger in this natural process. But, in the old days according to the Old Testament, there was the suggestion that blood made a woman impure and she needed, once upon a time, to be cleansed. So let me quote our text again ‘When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses’ In case you missed, it let me just highlight the relevant phrase that Luke uses: their purification implying that Mary needed to be made pure after her childbearing.

So today, when remember the baby Jesus being taken by his parents into the Temple at Jerusalem, we have a window onto a past way of making sense of the need to be made pure in the sight of God.

And let me leave you with the obvious question: how may we, today, be made pure in the sight of God who loves us as a father loves his child ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 37 : Purification

