

Sermon for The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple
February 2, 2020 the Rev. Deacon David Guilfoyle

We are in year A of the lectionary, and so we are reading mostly from the gospel of Matthew. But this Sunday we take a short detour and read from Luke's gospel. I admit that I really love spending time with Luke, it is such a rich resource. It is the longest of the gospels. Many of the stories we treasure in our faith are only found in Luke. What would it be like without the shepherds and the manger at Christmas? The stories of Mary and Martha, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan? How much less lovely would liturgy be without the The Song of Mary, the Magnificat? It is also arguably the most beautiful of the Gospels, full of hymns and poetry. The 19th century French rationalist Joseph Ernest Renan called Luke the most beautiful book in the world.

And in today's reading we get something else unique to Luke, a story of Jesus as a child.

Mary has gone through her period of purification following the birth of her child, and, as prescribed in Jewish law, she and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple, along with two turtle doves or pigeons, for presentation to the Lord. The devout Jew Simeon has been promised by God that he will not die until he sees the Messiah. He is drawn to the temple by the Spirit, and recognizes the infant Jesus as this promise fulfilled. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and gives us another liturgical gift, the Nunc dimittis, the Song of Simeon.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

This praise of Jesus continues as the 84 year old prophet Anna recognizes Jesus as the Jewish Savior and begins to speak about him to anyone that will listen. This naming of Jesus as Lord and Saviour continues with us. We often picture Jesus as King, Lord, Judge. We talk about the reign of God, the kingdom of God. Jesus is King of Kings. In our Nicene Creed, we acknowledge Jesus as sitting at the right hand of God. This is the image of an heir, sitting at the right hand of a King. This is, of course, all imagery. We experience the divine within our beings, and we want to share that experience. This royal language is a way for us to try and express

what is revealed to us inwardly, through the Holy Spirit; the mystery of God, the divinity of Jesus. It is something we really don't have the language for.

But there is another aspect of Jesus, he is also fully human. And whenever I read this passage from Luke, I am reminded of that. I am reminded of it because of a book I have read and reread several times. As we begin Black History Month, I will recommend it to you highly: Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Thurman was an African American minister, civil rights activist, pacifist, and a mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In this 1949 book, the Reverend Thurman speaks about this passage. And he points out something that Luke leaves out of the Jewish law from Leviticus, the full requirement is:

When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering ...
If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering

In other words, Mary and Joseph could not afford a lamb, and so they bring two birds. Jesus is not born a prince, he is born to an ordinary family, trying to scrape together a life in difficult circumstances. And circumstances are difficult for a Jewish family in Galilee during Jesus' time on earth. He lives in occupied territory. The Roman Empire conquered the Jewish lands and they were ruthless rulers. The Jews are governed by a puppet king. They pay taxes to Rome, which are then used to build temples to foreign gods on Jewish holy land. A foreign army lives in their midst, and resistance to Rome is dealt with quickly and without mercy. Rebellious cities are burned to ashes. The common Jewish person is powerless.

Like all disenfranchised then and now, the Jewish citizens are faced with difficult choices. They can swallow their contempt and pain and cooperate openly with the Roman authorities, quietly accepting this second class status. Or they can attempt to minimize contact with the authorities, to fly under the radar. Or they can rise up in violence. This is the world that Jesus is born into. He knows and understands the plight of the Jewish people because he is one of them. One of the powerless.

So, how does Jesus react to this world? Not as a king, ruler, or high priest. Not someone claiming power. Not as a mighty warrior. Let's remember the last part of Simeon's prophecy:

This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed.

He will not play the role that some want him to play. Many will love him, but many will also hate him. He is a disrupter. He will reach out to lay hands on lepers. He will associate with those living on the fringes. Eat with tax collectors. Heal the wounded, both Jewish and Gentile. He will speak truth to power, arguing with religious leaders who ignore the poor and put the law above compassion. Jesus gives us a different solution, not one of us against them. He challenges us to look across borders and divisions: economic, political, religious. We are one family. It doesn't mean we don't disagree with others, we do. It means we look towards reducing pain and poverty, not increasing our own power and prestige.

And so, we may speak of God with royal language, God speaks to us in a different way. God speaks to us through a human life. Jesus is "word made flesh". I love this description. Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, are the incarnation of the Divine in our world. It is the example we try and follow as disciples of Christ. Technology has changed the world in the last 2000 or so years, but it is still a world divided. There are still multitudes of disinherited in all parts of the world, including our own country. As I reread Thurman's book this past week, I was amazed at how relevant it still is today. The passages (written in 1949) about the African American communities applies equally to the Native American, Muslim, undocumented immigrants, and LGBT communities around us. Today Jesus still challenges us. He challenges and judges us in an unworldly way. His life compels us to review and reshape the values of our living. To remove some of the things that pride, or greed, or lust of power, cling to. And to accept instead the royal imperatives of his law of service.

Let's accept his challenge.