

*A Moment in the Temple*

(From the Gospel: *St. Luke ii.22 ff.*)

The Purification of St Mary the Virgin

(or, "The Presentation of Christ in the Temple";

also: The Fourth Sunday After Epiphany)

22 *And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; 23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) 24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. 25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. 33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. 34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; 35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. 36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; 37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. 38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. 39 And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. 40 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.*

Today's Gospel represents a marvelous meeting that took place on the day that Jesus' unsuspecting parents brought Him for the sole purpose of fulfilling the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Not only did some remarkable people make a surprise appearance on that occasion, but the very Triune God --Father, Son, and Holy Spirit-- was also manifested at the same time. Heaven and Earth met there, summoned as witnesses to this most important dedication. And it certainly seems likely that it all happened unbeknownst to a world far too busy and preoccupied with matters it deemed much higher and more significant than the little holy gathering in progress right in its very midst!

There are a number of precious gleanings from this text. First, notice that all of this was done *according to the law of Moses*, just like His recent circumcision: both the presentation of Jesus as Joseph and Mary's firstborn (Ex. 13:2, 12), and the offering for Mary's purification after giving birth (Lev. 12:8). Jesus' parents, as were the parents of John the Baptist, were also *upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly* (Luke 1:6). But the great paradox that immediately confronts us is that the very Baby around whom this

entire New Covenant story revolves is Himself the very fulfillment of the Law: *Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill*, said Jesus many years later (Matt. 5:17). His own sinless life would become for all men, by the grace and mercy of God, both the sacrificial sin offering necessary for any violation of the Law, as well as the Law's perfect fulfillment. Mary, at the commandment of God, is offering to Him the very offering of her Son that God Himself is making to men on behalf of men (*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* [John 3:16])!

There should have been no collision between Christ and the Law. How could they have possibly been at odds? The Law expresses throughout its incredible complexity of regulations the very holy and impossibly unattainable God. He made Himself known through the utter rigor of commandments that cannot possibly be perfectly followed, for it is beyond us (see Galatians 2:16: *...by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified...*). Christ, the Author of the Law, represents its essence in His very Person.

The curious --and deeply significant-- fact is that the religious establishment of Christ's day, who alone are unrepresented in this scene of the temple Presentation we are studying today, not only utterly failed to recognize the One to whom all efforts at conformity to the ceremonial regulations is due, but were put to shame by the simplest and most unprepossessing of men! Look again at the Gospel: Simeon, a very elderly man, ready to die, moved *by the Spirit*, and *waiting for the consolation of Israel*, not only identifies the Messiah, but preaches under inspiration about the universal scope of His ministry. But Simeon also anticipates in the soberest of tones the awful conflict that has already begun, ever since the birth of this Child, between the agenda of God, supported by that faithful and believing remnant among mankind who have always been present, with the agenda of Man, that is, those who use God and the things of God to promote themselves, to gain power over others, and, if it were possible, to seize for their own ends the very reigns of the control of the universe:

*And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; 35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*

*... that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed...* It is to be a time of reckoning: those who are truly good of heart, whose motives are pure, who are prepared to stand back and allow the King to enter in with all His glory, that they might share in His reign...these will be distinguished undeniably and permanently from those who hid their wickedness beneath religious trappings, whose motives, though apparently the loftiest and noblest, are revealed to be the lowest: love of self, and hatred of God and man.

And there was Anna, 84 years old. She came *in that instant* into the midst of our picture, and *spoke of [Christ] to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.*

It is indeed the most wonderful of occasions. All of the Temple goers should have stood around and worshipped. The entire city, yes, the whole nation, should have been filled with the celebration and wonder of what was finally transpiring for the covenant people of Israel: the long-awaited arrival of Messiah. And around them, in every part of the world, the same refrain should have been taken up and sung with ever-increasing praise and glory, for the means of the redemption of all men from sin --*all men*-- Jew, and Gentile, had been manifested.

But instead, it was, in its way, the most intimate and private of affairs. There were few attendees. Only two utterly astonished parents upon which this precious Life had been visited, who *marvelled at those things which were spoken of him*, things that Mary long ago had already been *pondering in her heart* (Luke 2:19). And only a pious old man and woman, whose words of praise to God for the Child they beheld made them true spokespeople for all believing Israel. Perhaps a few passers-by stopped to listen, but if faith had not informed them of the reality of what they witnessed, they would have quickly moved on. But God the Father was there, the One in whose honor the temple had been built, for whom its vast array of activities was carried on, a religious system that had long ago eclipsed the reality of the very Deity it was supposed to represent. God the Spirit was present, leading His two humble servants to witness the arrival of Jesus, and inspiring them with prophetic messages. And at the very Center of the entire matter was God the Son, manifested now in human flesh for all to behold.

So how is it that it could have been missed? Why must Mary hear those awful words: *Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also?* If all of this was offered initially to Israel, why was such divine magnanimity ignored? This was after all a salvation *prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.* All of the human principals in this little drama have proven themselves thoroughly both through obedience to the Mosaic Law and by devout lives. The angel Gabriel had spoken of Jesus to Mary at the Annunciation less than a year earlier that:

*He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.* (Luke 1:32)

And Mary herself would soon speak these words we know as part of the Magnificat: *He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.*

Herein lies the unspeakable depths of this story: a nation rejects its God, and commits a corporate sin that, with the exception of individual conversions, will continue with its attendant effects until there is corporate repentance (see Zech. 12:10, and Romans 11:23-27). The very ar-

ray of promises uttered to Israel at the birth of its Savior must be denied the covenant nation until its repentance, but instead the great gates of God's mercy have been thrown open as wide as they possibly can be to receive *a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language* (Rev. 7:9), invited to share in the very blessings that once were limited to the Chosen People.

The happy time of celebration described in today's Gospel will soon be shadowed by the gradual overspreading of the dark clouds of hatred and opposition, which will descend in a few short years with full force upon the Crucified Messiah on Mount Calvary, dying for the sins of the world:

*He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him...Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. You make His soul an offering for sin... (from Isaiah 53)*

The promises to Israel must wait for fulfillment. A very long time. Millennia. In large part she still awaits the *consolation* that Simeon was pleased to receive so many years ago. But meanwhile, untold millions have been swept into the New Covenant which receives all on the basis of faith.

This is God's plan. Perhaps we may wish it had been otherwise, that it would not have entailed the hard realities of Mary's suffering, Israel's rejection of its Messiah, His crucifixion, followed by His resurrection and departure, and the divisions among men that the Gospel invariably produces, even today.

But that's what we have. And because God has thus planned it, it is the best way it possibly could be.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*