

JESUS' PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

Christmas 1 Year B – upload only

Is. 61:10-62:3; Ps. 148; Gal. 4:4-7; Lk. 2:22-40

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The observance of religious requirements and rituals has fallen on hard times lately. This is no more evident than in the life and worship of the church. Ritual in Judaism was, of course, an essential part of life. The Law taught that God was to be honoured in every part of their life and therefore, much of their lives were taken up with some form of ritual observance. The danger is, of course, that outward demonstrations of piety do not necessarily represent inward holiness. In fact, they can often hide insincerity and deceit in a person. Jesus attacked the hypocrisy of some of the Pharisees and Sadducees of his day and so the early church were careful to distance themselves from many Jewish practices. The Reformation also, in response to hypocrisy it found in the established church, sought to separate internal aspects faith from external ritual.

The pressures of secularism and modern life have again reduced the significance of ritual observances in the lives of most Christians today. At best it is seen by many as antiquated religion that has little relevance today apart from the social expectations of events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. At worst it is seen by others as not only antiquated and out of touch with contemporary worship but positively detrimental to worship in the 21st century. However, in the light of the text before us, we need to be careful not to underestimate the importance of religious rituals and celebrations within the context of worship.

Approximately one month after Jesus had been circumcised and named, according to the Law of Israel and in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, his parents brought him up to the Temple in Jerusalem to perform the necessary purification and dedication rituals. It is in this context—ritual fulfilment of the Law—that the prophetic declarations, concerning the life and ministry of Jesus, were made by Simeon and Anna.

While ritual is important, its importance is not found in the ritual, itself, but in what the ritual signifies. This is especially true in Luke's account of Jesus' presentation in the Temple. While the ritual was important, the real importance conveyed by these verses is found in what they say about the role of Jesus and his birth—in the fulfilment of God's promise of salvation. Simeon and Anna, as devout persons, are important because they recognise and prophetically articulate what Jesus' role will be. As such it conveys the essence of the gospel. It's primary purpose is to declare who Jesus is and foreshadow what he will do.

Well, Who is Jesus? What will he do? and how should we respond to this revelation concerning Jesus Christ that we find in these verses? First, and in the context of the rituals being performed here, we learn that...

I. JESUS IS THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE OF SALVATION.

Throughout the Old Testament, we find many prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah to Israel. The most notable of these would have to be those that came from the prophet, Isaiah. At various times during the history of the Jewish people, the call for the Messiah to come soon, became significant. While things were going well, the immediate coming of the Messiah seemed less imperative. When things were not going so well, the call became more urgent—as it was around the time of Jesus' birth.

The same is often true for us. When things are going well and we are satisfied with our lives, God can become, quite easily, a secondary issue for us. When times are tough—when we are burdened with problems, God becomes more important to us, as we suddenly call on him to fix things us for us—perhaps making all sorts of promises, which we seldom keep. Well, at the time that Jesus was born, things were not going too well. Israel was overrun with Romans and traditional Jewish culture was in danger of being watered down by Greek influence.

There were, however, in Jesus' day, devout men and women like Simeon and Anna, who spent time worshipping God and who were, as Luke describes it, looking for the consolation of Israel—looking for the One who would bring hope and salvation—waiting in expectant anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. This was even more exciting for Simeon, now an old man, because God had promised him that he would actually see the Messiah with his own eyes before he died. And because he was old, he knew that he did not have long to wait.

So, in obedience to the Law Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to perform the necessary purification rites. And it was here, in their fulfilment of the Law, in the context of religious rituals, that both Simeon and Anna witnessed the fulfilment of the prophecies concerning the Messiah.

Having now witnessed the One who is to bring salvation, Simeon can die in peace. Peace that characterises both the goal and the result of God's redemptive work in Christ. That same peace that is offered to all, for... (and here is the second important thing we learn)...

II. CHRIST IS THE MEANS OF SALVATION FOR ALL PEOPLE.

Simeon's prophetic declaration concerning Jesus, contained one particular aspect that was not generally understood too well by the Jews. That is, that the Messiah would be the Messiah, not just for the Jews but for all people. He would be both "a light to the Gentiles"

and “the glory of the Lord in Israel.” These two prophetic statements, reminiscent of the prophecies of Isaiah, bring out the universal nature of God’s salvation. The fulfilment of the latter, “the glory of the Lord in Israel,” we see in the account of Christ’s ministry in Israel. The fulfilment of the former, “a light to the Gentiles,” we see recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. As you will recall, Luke is the attributed author of both these books. Both Luke’s account of the ministry of Jesus *and* his account of the spread of the gospel as recorded in the book of Acts, together, represent the fulfilment of God’s promise of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles.

But, while salvation has come to all, Jesus will have a double significance, for there are both positive and negative aspects to the salvation that Jesus brings. Here Luke takes up the thought of the stone that God lays, that will be a foundation that can be trusted. For some, Jesus will be the cause of new life—the One through whom salvation will come as a welcome guest. For others, he will be a stumbling block—the One upon whom those who reject him will be dashed to pieces.

Simeon’s prophecy concerning Jesus’ ministry highlights both of these two aspects. In his blessing addressed to Mary, Simeon foreshadows the rejection of Jesus. The One who would bring salvation would also bring judgement—the cornerstone would be the stone of stumbling for others. Jesus is to be the sign of God’s faithfulness—the proof of the reality of God’s salvation. For those who reject Christ as God’s agent of salvation, his presence will be a sign for judgement rather than salvation. No thought will remain hidden from him—no doubt, no hypocrisy. To Christ, all will be revealed.

If Jesus, then is both the fulfilment of God’s promise of salvation *and* the means by which all people are saved, what should be our adequate response?

III. THE CORRECT RESPONSE TO THE REVELATION OF GOD'S SALVATION IN CHRIST IS WORSHIP.

As we begin to understand the nature and consequence of Jesus’ ministry in accordance with Simeon’s prophetic declarations, another important aspect of the text is revealed to us. That aspect concerns how we should respond to that revelation. We gain some insight into this response from both Simeon and Anna.

It is very evident, here, that the response of both Simeon and Anna was to worship God with thanksgiving and glorification. This should not strike us at all as being unusual for we see many such responses to divine revelation throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. The birth of the Messiah and the fulfilment of God’s promise of salvation are both occasions for praising God, for giving him thanks, for glorifying him.

Often, in the church we lose some of that sense of awe and majesty that comes with a divine revelation of God. There are, I believe, a number of reasons for this. One of them that is significant for us here, is that the contemporary church has often misunderstood the nature of ritual. Ritual is not just a dry formality of a forgotten era—it can be and we need to be sensitive to this—but essentially it is a way of expressing our worship to God in ways that contain significant meaning. In this way, it points, not to itself, but points to something beyond itself, for so much that passes as contemporary worship, today, can devolve into nothing more than self-centred entertainment.

However, the grace of God, evident in the revelation of God's salvation through Christ should always generate, for us, a sense of awe and an attitude of worship, that focusses upon God and not ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Both Simeon and Anna exemplified a devout response to God's promise and God's response to human devotion and worship. Prompted by the Holy Spirit Simeon and Anna worshipped God in the Temple, waiting expectantly for the coming Messiah. Representing all those who trust in God, they declared that Jesus is the One who will bring salvation for Israel, but not all would receive this salvation. Jesus himself would be rejected and many in Israel would reject the gospel. However, the gospel was also meant for "a light for the revelation to the Gentiles." As such the light of the gospel will spread throughout the world.

The prophetic declarations by Simeon and Anna concerning the child, Jesus, were set in the context of the fulfilment of the Law, in the observance of ritual worship. The prophecies spoken to Joseph and Mary are central to this scene, but they stand in a powerful context—obedience to the Law, celebration of a birth, worship in the Temple, and recognition that God's promises were being fulfilled. The ceremony was not an irrelevant intrusion into their lives but an expression of their commitment to God and the recognition of his grace toward them. Through their ritual observance, Joseph and Mary saw God at work in the events they experienced. And our first and best response to this is to worship God.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.