

Presentation of Christ 2014

The Presentation of Christ at the Temple is also sometimes called Candlemas. The image of Christ as the light which we have heard so often since Advent, has led to a celebration of light countering darkness, with candles often taking a central place in the observance of this festival.

For many priests it marks the end of a number of services, clustered together, where candles and all their inherent dangers, especially when children are around, cause some stress. There are Advent Carol services, Christingle services, candlelit carol services, and then Candlemas, which necessitate in the world of Health and Safety, buckets of sand and of water, fire extinguishers and clear, multiple exits. Why do mothers not tie up little girls' waist length hair at such times?

Although called the Presentation of Christ the rituals undertaken here were the purification rituals demanded 40 days after childbirth. Jewish families went through several ceremonies after a baby's birth. Every boy was circumcised and named on the 8th day after birth. This showed by symbolism the Jews' separation from Gentiles and their unique relationship with God. Then one month after birth, a first born son was presented to God and this ceremony included redeeming, buying back, the child from God through an offering. In this way parents acknowledged that the child belonged to God, who alone has the power to give life. For 40 days after the birth of a boy and 80 days after the birth of a girl, the mother was ceremonially unclean and could not enter the temple. At

the end of her time of separation the parents were to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or a pigeon for a sin offering. The priest would sacrifice these animals and declare her clean if a lamb was too expensive the parents could bring a second pigeon or dove which is what Mary and Joseph did. Jesus was God's son, but his family carried out these ceremonies according to God's law. Jesus was born not above the law, instead he fulfilled it perfectly.

This fulfilment of the law's requirements is one of the themes of this day. It also marks again the Epiphany theme, with Simeon proclaiming the light coming and its significance for Gentiles and prophesying the cross. For the Church it marks the end of this period in the year which started in Advent in which we celebrate the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus.

The reading from Malachi is quoted at the beginning of the first three gospels with reference to John the Baptist. Its origin however is in the 4th Century BC, when the society it was written for was corrupt, and God had been absent from his temple during then nation's exile. It speaks of judgement, which will be painful, of purification and of offering. Judgement begins at the house of God, so that worship may be pure. For this we all have a responsibility. As members of fallen humanity our motives may be mixed, our lives may be compromised, our goals for living closer to God may often fall short.

However, we are reassured by the reading from Hebrews, that having become human, Jesus was able to defeat death, we all must die, but death is not the end, it is the doorway to eternal life. Jesus understands our struggles,

the times when we fail to live the life with God that we want to, he can give us strength to face temptation, he is merciful when we repent. He can be depended upon to restore our broken relationship with God. He is the great High Priest who has offered the ultimate atonement to God.

As the annunciation story and the shepherd's vision have already made clear Luke's reporting of Simeon and Anna's words continue the message: Jesus is the focus of faith and hope, the one who brings salvation through his own suffering. All nations, all people may now see and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ.