

The Presentation Of Christ In The Temple

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[0 : 00] Today, in the church year, when we remember your being presented in the temple, help us to present your word and live your life. Amen.

It's good to be here with you. I was just thinking as we began to sing this song that maybe my timing was not too good. Lord, bid your servant go in peace. Your word is now fulfilled. Anyhow, maybe there's a double meaning there.

Originally, I had intended to speak on the epistle that we read tonight from Galatians 5, that wonderful insight about being free in Christ coupled with living in the Spirit.

However, preparing for the talk this morning at 8 o'clock last night and also reflecting so much of the music and hymns that were sung earlier in the day at our 10 o'clock service, which focused on this special day in the Christian year or church calendar, I changed my mind and decided to build my message around this particular day.

Maybe I also have a sort of subconscious desire to speak on an event associated with February the 2nd so that I can always remember that this was the date on which I preached my first evening sermon at St. John's.

[1 : 35] I suppose in more practical ways I could say that I did it on the same time that the new piano arrived. But nevertheless, in any event, if you didn't know it, February the 2nd is a special day.

It's a holy day in the church. And this is the first time in some years that it has come along on a Sunday. And therefore, it seems a fitting time for us to look at it in some depth.

Now, if you have a church calendar like this one here, for instance, and perhaps some of you do, you probably noted that the day was special. There's usually some kind of information or name on those special days.

And one of the great things that these calendars help us to discover is that the Christian year revolves around the life of Jesus. It tells us constantly that the days of our years circle around and center in Christ.

And that's the great repeating wisdom of the church year. And in the church year, there are six seasons instead of the four that we find in the secular year.

[2 : 47] And this year in the church, it began on the 1st of December with the season of Advent, preparing for Christmas, then Christmas itself, and then Epiphany.

And then Lent, which is just nine days away.

And after Lent comes Easter and Pentecost to complete the three or the six seasons. And these seasons, which once again remind us of the life and the suffering and the temptations, the death, the resurrection, and the continuing presence of Christ among us.

Now, there's something else that we should perhaps note about the church calendar. During the course of the year, there are 16 days that are set aside for the remembrance of individuals in the New Testament who are closely associated with Christ.

People like Peter and Paul and James, and of course John, after whom this church is named. And his day, I think, is set aside on December the 27th.

[4 : 09] But because it falls into the Christmas season, I'm sure that sometimes it doesn't get the attention, perhaps, that it deserves. I would also say that in the churches of the Anglican Communion, all the names which are singled out in the 16 days are of people who are mentioned in the New Testament.

There are, of course, in the church here, and in your prayer book on Roman numerals number nine right there in the front, there is that great calendar of so many wonderful people down through the centuries who have added so much to the church of Christ.

But in the Anglican Communion, the great personalities that are singled out basically in the special days are the 16 I've mentioned. But the Reformers found that the calendar would become so crowded by putting in all those names that you can read there in your prayer book that they singled out the 16.

And so these are 16 saint days, drawing the six church seasons. And then there are four other days set aside for what we might call events in the life of Jesus that are less important than his death and resurrection, yet significant, significant at least, and worthy of remembrance.

And today, February the 2nd, is one of them. It is called in the calendar and in the prayer book, the presentation of Christ in the temple, commonly called the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

[5 : 52] Now, this last title isn't exactly in the language you hear around a lot of Anglican churches. I'm not so sure you hear it around St. John's. And certainly most Protestants would react to it.

But I always remember that one of our evangelical professors at Wakeliff College telling us, when we were students, that one of the first things that he thought staunch old Protestants could expect when they arrived in heaven is that once Jesus had welcomed them, he would say, come meet my mother Mary.

You didn't know her very well on earth. I was thinking that probably up there in the background may be Mary, too. It would be interesting to know who that person is.

In other words, our professor was simply telling us that sometimes our bias can hide some great truths from us, and that we can learn a great deal from Mary, and she is one of the key biblical persons as evident in today's gospel, which I now invite you to turn to in your pew Bible.

It's on page 55 in the New Testament section in Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 21. And I thought we could read it a section at a time, and I've broken it down under four sections, and I think as we look at each section I can make a few comments as well so that we can bring out something of the significance of this event and this day.

[7 : 30] So on page 55, verses 21 to 24 are the ones that we'll read together first of all.

So if you have that, let's read. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

And when the time came for their purification, according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves.

Amen. These verses tell us that the old Jewish ceremonies are observed in the life of Jesus.

Sometimes when Christians read the Old Testament or passages like this in the New, they say, and some of you may be thinking perhaps even those terms now, why should we take time in the 20th century to commemorate events like this, which seem at first sight and first reading to be little more than the archaeological remains of a religion that we have long since outgrown?

[9 : 05] Well, maybe it has more to say to us today than we realize. In any event, in these verses, in this first section of our Gospel, we see Jesus undergoing three ancient ceremonies which every Jewish boy had to undergo.

First of all, there was circumcision. Every Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, and on that day he also received his name.

Secondly, there was a ceremony called the redemption of the firstborn, which you can read about in the book of Numbers in chapter 18.

And thirdly, there was the purification after childbirth, details of which are found in Leviticus chapter 12. I might say in passing that there is a service in the prayer book called the churching of women. It used to be called that. It had somewhat the same purpose as now we call it the thanksgiving of a child's birth. Now, these three ceremonies are strange old ceremonies.

[10 : 12] But all three have at the back of them the conviction that a child is the gift of God. And certainly we can all identify with that. And while the form and the wording of rites and ceremonies and services change, the basic truth continues.

We still present children to God. Only today this is symbolized by water instead of two pigeons.

Luke, as you probably know, was not a Jew.

But he had the ability to appreciate the fact that Jesus was a Jew, that his whole life was lived within the context of Jewish life and religion. For over a year, I was a member, the Anglican member of a Christian-Jewish dialogue here in the city that used to meet monthly.

I think there were about 15 of us from different denominations, coupled with about five Jewish rabbis, which were maybe six of them that came from this particular part of the lower mainland. And we studied scripture together, as well as current issues, our differences, and so on. And I learned a great deal from the rabbis about Jewish culture and religion.

[11 : 30] And strangely enough, in the process, I also found that Jesus became more real in various ways. And like Luke, I am more than ever before appreciating the fact that when God became man in Christ, he became a real Jewish man, not drifting in from outer space on the clouds of spirituality, but rooted in history, in a place, in a race, and in all the customs and conventions that we normally associate with a people.

Yes, Christianity has its roots, and they become Jewish roots, as Archie noted in his sermon this morning. Now, once again, we move back to our gospel event, and as we reflect on it, we see not only Jewish ceremony being fulfilled, but Christian revelation and prophecy springs forth, as an old man appears on the scene, as the young couple enter the temple with their baby.

Let me add that this scene also shows the intergenerational aspect of worship. All ages, all drawn together, and that is still the joy of the church at its best, that its worship and message is for every generation, the old, the young, the in-between.

And this is especially evident, of course, at baptismal services, but it certainly should also be evident at communion services. As old Simeon saw the baby brought into the temple, he came forward.

And he was one of those who had been waiting and watching for better days, for the new life full of hope, when others had given up entirely to despair, and exposed to everything that might be able to redeem the life of his people, he looked into the face of the baby, and with that insight, that Holy Spirit, which we cannot explain but often experience, he saw the light of God in the face of this child.

[13 : 40] I wonder if you can sense this wonderful moment of truth becoming rooted into the history for all time. Wouldn't it be great if we had television cameras present with stop action and replays?

But the revelation and prophecy is not all good news, because having expressed his appreciation to God in the words of the nunc dimittis, Simeon turns to the young couple and says something like this, Don't think that this will be all sweetness and light for you.

This is not going to be an easy way, for the baby of yours is going to be the decisive factor in the history of humanity. Those who reject him will fall, those who accept him will rise, and there will be much pain and suffering, and you, Mary, will suffer most of all.

And indeed she did, as approximately 33 years later, she watched her son die on the cross for the salvation of the world.

So let's read then verses 25 to 35. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.

[14 : 59] And this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

And inspired by the Spirit, he came into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to the people Israel.

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against.

And a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed. Perhaps these verses or this section could be entitled, Simeon the Saint Whose Hopes Were Realized.

[16 : 25] God had promised through the Holy Spirit that life would not end for him before he had seen God's anointed one. And in the baby Jesus, Simeon realized that one had arrived.

Now he was ready to depart in peace. And in those wonderful words that you see here, which have become the nunc dimittis, another of the great canicles of the church, which we find in evening prayer and which we've already said.

I want to single out mainly verse 34. So if you want to glance at it there, because we find that Simeon gives a kind of summary of the work and destiny of Jesus.

He says, Behold, this child is set for the fall and the rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against. First of all, as we reflect on this verse, we note that Jesus will be the cause whereby many will fall.

This is one of those strange and hard sayings, but it at least reminds us that there is such a thing as judgment and that God indeed has the last word.

[17 : 40] And then we are also told in this verse that many will rise, that Jesus will lift people out of the old life and into the new, out of sin into goodness, which of course he still does.

And we rejoice in that and celebrate his presence and this good news every day. But not everybody accepts Jesus.

In fact, verse 34 also tells us that he will meet with much opposition. He will be spoken against and sad to say. That continues to this day.

While many people, like Pontius Pilate, try to wash their hands of him, ultimately every person has to decide either for or against Jesus.

Once you encounter him, there can be no neutrality. It becomes an either-or situation. Yet even in old age, we can accept him.

[18 : 40] Which brings us to verses 36 to 38, where we read about a lovely old lady, Anna, a widow, 84 years old, who lived a life of fasting, prayer, and worship.

Yes, like Simeon, she is a wonderful example of what elderly people can be and do in the church. So let's read verses 36 to 38.

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity.

And as a widow till she was 84, she did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to God and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

I suppose some people say that this is a biblical mandate to make sure that women declare their ages. But I'm not quite sure. That's what we're after. But I would like to say that we do live at a time when there is an increasing number of elderly people.

[20 : 02] And hopefully, more of them will have the saintly qualities of Simeon and Anna. Certainly, they can be our role models. And this was noted at our diocesan conference on aging held here yesterday when about, I guess, around 100 people were present.

And it was a very encouraging response to the Ministry of Aging. And given out for the first time at that conference was this new brochure, which is entitled Aging is Good News, Especially When You're Involved.

Aging is Good News, and then it goes on to say a few things that needs to be said about the promise, the performance, the purpose, and potential of aging people.

There are a few copies of this, I believe, at the back of the church for anyone who might be interested. But it does close on this particular statement that these great trends of aging people have powerful implications on our community and church life and indeed they will.

But no matter what our age, like Jesus, our goal in life is to grow in Christian maturity, which brings us to the final verses of our Gospel for today.

[21 : 19] And we will now read them, verses 39 and 40. And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee to their own city, Nazareth, and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

God grant that we too may experience such growth, such strength, such wisdom, and such favor. However, it seems to me that for such maturity become a reality, we need to develop some sort of routine or rule of life.

You may know that the prayer book has one on page 555, an interesting relationship of numbers here when you stop to think of it, that here's the Gospel on page 55 of the Bible, and here's this rule of life in your prayer book on page 555.

Perhaps that will help you to remember it. And perhaps we should all read this rule of life, especially with Lent looming on the horizon. And I leave that with you. We won't do it tonight.

In any event, I will conclude my sermon on the presentation of Christ in the temple by saying something about the importance of routine in religion. But first, let me say that last week, for the first

time in my life, I spent five days in hospital and discovered something of the miracle of routine in health and medicine.

[22 : 55] Of course, routine can often be deadly dull. But a life without routine of any kind is likely to be an undisciplined life.

Even talented people have to practice and practice in order to improve and to keep in shape. And any army, of course, knows the utmost importance of routine for its soldiers and success. coming to church, coming to communion, hopefully, is always more than a routine. But if you give up the regularity and leave it to what people sometimes call the movement of the spirit only, you are likely to stop coming eventually.

I think it's true to say that the spirit needs tracks to travel on, channels of communication, and a person with regular religious routine is more likely to grow and mature than the person with none. Jesus certainly was introduced to the Jewish routine as a baby, and we are wise to introduce our children to the Christian routine as babies too.

[24 : 11] I'm eternally grateful to my mother for teaching me the routine of church life, I suppose you might say, on her knee.

So, finally, let me mention that this day reminds us that the routines of religion change from generation to generation, but the real things in religion remain the same.

The form and wording of rights and services change, but the same truth continues. And as I already said, we still present children to God, only today we use water instead of pigeons.

Holy communion, married services, they too change, but not the reality of the sacramental life. The truth in that new book of alternate services which the Anglican Church is beginning to use all across Canada is the same truth as in the prayer book, only it is worded and arranged differently.

And some Sunday I'll speak more about that. The 2nd of February. When it comes around next year, whether you're here in some other place, hopefully that picture of the temple seen once again will impact itself upon your mind in imagination, that you will see again the great intergenerational scene which reflects all ages in the church, the young couple, the baby, the parents, the old man, and the old woman.

[25 : 53] Remember also why they mainly gathered there, namely to give to God the new life, to dedicate it to God because they knew that all life comes from God and must return to God.

Remember that this event in the life of Jesus reminds us that routine is necessary in religion, but religion must never be limited to the same old routines and patterns.

But above all, I hope February the 2nd will remind us all every year that because life belongs to God, we can give, we can present our life to God in this place, in this temple, here and now.

Let us pray. Help us, O God, to find our way through the rites and ceremonies of our religion. to the real things that lie at the heart of it. Teach us to be like Jesus in all that we say and do, in church and out of church, that our lives which come from you, O God, may be given back to you every day of our existence.

[27 : 20] Through Christ our Lord. Amen. There we go.

Never. Thank you. Thank you. I hope you rise only in the light next time.

Thank you. Let us see you. Thanks. Let us see you. Then we're out of church. We'll let you know the change surrs in the fires and the again near our dear gospel. Thank you, we're done on Christmas. Here. ausge the a six-letter and GOOD forgotten here.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[28 : 57] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Please be seated for the announcements. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.