

For anyone who likes an orderly progression of historical events, the last few weeks have been pretty confusing. We celebrated Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, and then on January 1<sup>st</sup> it was the Feast of the Circumcision. So far, so good – Jewish law requires that to take place eight days after birth – except that sometimes, on the Sunday immediately after Christmas, we hear about Jesus, aged twelve, going to the Temple in Jerusalem and staying behind to debate with the rabbis. Then on January 6<sup>th</sup> there was the visit of the Wise Men, which took place when Jesus was about two, followed two days later by his Baptism, which happened when he was grown up. Sometimes the ‘water into wine’ miracle appears in mid-January. And today we observe the feast of the Presentation, placed accurately on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, forty days after Jesus’ birth, also as required by Jewish Law. Altogether it’s a bit of a switchback ride.

Having probably managed to confuse you all, I shall move on quickly to the Presentation itself. Two things were happening in parallel. Joseph and Mary were doing ‘for their child what was customary under the law’, and God was fulfilling promises.

Every so often someone decides that they are going to read the Bible through from beginning to end. They start enthusiastically with the lively episodes in Genesis, trudge through the wilderness with the Israelites in Exodus, and usually grind to a dispirited halt somewhere in the endless lists of regulations and observances in Leviticus and Numbers. One of those observances underlies today’s reading. After every birth the parents had to go to a priest to give thanks for the child and for the mother to be ritually purified. This took place forty days after the birth of a son, or eighty days after the birth of a daughter, and the mother could then return to her normal life in the community. Furthermore, because God had decreed that all first-born humans and animals were consecrated to him, if the child was their first son the parents had to make an offering to ‘redeem’ him – in effect to buy him back from Temple service. The official fee was a lamb or, if the family was poor, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

(I’m not even going to start on why daughters didn’t have the same importance, or why the mother had to wait twice as long for purification if her child was a girl. We just have to accept that life in first-century Palestine was very different from life in twenty-first-century Britain.)

We do need to remember regularly that Jesus, his family and all his disciples, were ordinary observant Jews. Jesus was circumcised, he had the first-century equivalent of a Bar-Mitzvah (which is why he went to the Temple when he was twelve). He learned the scriptures and went to the synagogue, taking his part in the rituals, reading from the scrolls and preaching there. He ate the Passover meal with his disciples. When he criticised the Pharisees and Sadducees it was because they had abandoned love and compassion for legalistic observance and empty ritual. As the first reading says: ‘Jesus did not come to help the angels, but the descendants of Abraham’, (i.e. the Jews), ‘therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect’. That included their religion, even though he was the Son of God. Jesus never tried to set up a rival religion. His mission was to make God’s love and mercy understood and available to everyone who wanted it. He was killed because the blinkered, bigoted Jewish hierarchy felt that their privileges and authority were threatened. He was, as Simeon said, a sign that was opposed so that the inner thoughts of many would be revealed. But that is a long way ahead.

While Joseph and Mary were following the law, two of God's promises were also being fulfilled. Although Jesus was still a tiny baby, he was recognised to be the Messiah by two very pious Jews. A man and a woman were in the temple, both old, both wise, and both had waited a long time for the revelation. Simeon wasn't the official Temple priest who received the offering and carried out the ritual – there is no mention at all of whoever that was. He was simply a devout man living in Jerusalem, who had come to the Temple that day because God had prompted him. Anna experienced a similar nudge. They were representative of the faith as God wanted it to be, not as the religious authorities had redefined it. We don't know whether the priests heard Simeon's poem of thanksgiving, and they might well have dismissed Anna's prophecies as the maunderings of an old woman. It would be more than thirty years before the authorities began to be aware that something very unusual was happening, and before the mysteries that Mary pondered began to make sense. But God was working his purpose out. Light had come into the world, and would be revealed to all the nations.