

## 20141228ChristmasISermon

On Boxing Day I became a grand-uncle! My late sister's only daughter-in-law, Gerrie, gave birth to a baby daughter, Emily Elizabeth. This made the whole Christmas story and the birth of a child more significant for Karen and me. Unlike the shepherds and wise men, we didn't have to go to a stable but rather to Panorama Clinic to visit the new born.

In today's Gospel we read the story of Jesus' presentation in Jerusalem. There is very little in the four canonical Gospels that tell us about Jesus' childhood. Along with the stories of the circumcision and naming of Jesus (which we celebrate on January 1 every year), the visit of the wise men (which we remember at Epiphany, the slaughter of the innocents which is read from Matthew Gospel on Christmas I in year A), and Jesus in the temple as a twelve-year-old read on Christmas I in year C, this story gives one a rare opportunity for us preachers to teach something about Jesus' childhood on a Sunday.

However the shortage of stories about Jesus' childhood merely remind us that the gospels are not biographies. They are kerygmatic narratives. Kerygmatic – what a lovely word to bander about in a sermon! Kerygmatic means preaching or teaching. So this story of the baby Jesus being presented in the temple is here to proclaim the gospel and to undergird and strengthen our faith in Christ and not much else. The little information that these stories give us about Jesus' childhood are not intended to explain the development of Jesus' character or personality. It is clear that Luke's childhood stories try to make theological points: namely, Jesus was born a Jew among Jews. He came under the Law of Moses. And, although he fulfilled the law in honouring his father and mother (as we hear at the end of Chapter 2 of Luke v51), his ultimate obedience was to his heavenly Father. As such, our Gospel lesson is easily linked to the 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson where Paul tells us that Jesus was "born of woman" and "born under the law" so that he might redeem those who were under the law.

The presentation of Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem is carried out specific requirements of the Law of Moses in Leviticus 12, where a woman after giving birth to a son, is considered impure for forty days. At the end of that period, she is to bring an offering to the temple, which the priest offers as a sacrifice, effecting her purification. In addition, in Exodus it states that every first-born male, whether human or animal, "belongs" to the Lord. While animals would be sacrificed, first-born sons needed to be redeemed. According to Numbers 3, the redemption involved the payment of five shekels to the priest. However, according to another tradition in Numbers 3, the tribe of the Levites takes the place of the first-born sons of Israel as the Lord's possession. Thus the biblical notion of redemption included the idea that the first-born son "belongs" to the Lord in a special way and is dedicated to serve him (as the Levites were also dedicated to serve him).

Luke has apparently taken this old idea of the first-born son being dedicated to God's service and made it fruitful for his narrative. The Torah contains no requirement that the first-born son be presented at the temple. However, Luke makes Jesus birth a parallel with the story of Samuel. When Hannah, who had no children, prayed to God for a son, she vowed that, if she had a son, she would give him to God for all his days. After Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple, and he was "lent" to the Lord for life. It is clear that Mary in Luke takes the role of Hannah, we need just compare Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving to God with Mary's Magnificat to see this. Jesus, therefore takes the role of Samuel. Thus when Joseph and Mary present Jesus to the Lord in Jerusalem, they are in effect dedicating his life to God. No mention of redemption money is made. So, Jesus will be "holy to the Lord". With these words Luke subtly alters the language of Exodus from a command to consecrate the first-born to God to a declaration about Jesus. This is similar to the words of angel Gabriel who tells Mary that her son will be "holy" and will be called the "Son of God," because he will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. The story thus sets the stage for Jesus' life dedicated fully to his heavenly Father.

As I mentioned already, Paul speaks of Jesus as having been born under the law in order to redeem those who were under the law. Instead of being redeemed, Jesus himself will, by his death, redeem others. This happens when Jesus

takes upon himself the curse of the law -- indeed, "becomes" the curse (of the law) -- by being crucified on the tree. That is the scandal of the cross, as Paul calls it, by which God saves the world.

The idea is typical of Paul, and perhaps less like Luke. Yet the scandal of the cross is hinted at in Luke 2:34 where it says that Jesus will be the cause of many rising and falling in Israel -- he will be both the stone upon which some stumble and the stone of salvation. In any case, Luke's account certainly gives credence to Paul's claim. The dedication of Jesus to God at the temple sets Jesus on the way to his work of redemption.

Simeon and Anna appear as devout Jews who are awaiting the fulfilment of God's promises of consolation and redemption for Israel. These sections of Luke's story seem to fulfil the prophesy of Deutero-Isaiah. Simeon and Anna thus become spokesman and spokeswoman for the salvation and redemption that is to come through Jesus. Interesting when at Christmas time we hear that we do everything for the Children, that two elderly people seem to be so important in this story. It is Simeon who gets a glimpse of the salvation that one-day the whole world ("all flesh") will see. He also sees forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Now, that is the ultimate meaning of Christmas, the incarnation of the Son of God.