

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple and
The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin
(Candlemas)

February 2, 2020 – The Rev. Gary Lawler, Church of the Ascension, Chicago

“Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2: 17)

In Nomine+

Let me begin by being the **last** to wish you a Merry Christmas! Because that is what we are celebrating, today – the very last vestige of Christmas 2019. If you still have any trappings of Christmas that have not been put away for the year, today is absolutely the final day of grace before you can be cited by the liturgy police for excessive celebration or worse, for suspicion of holiday sloth. Nevertheless, from this day forward, we are compelled no longer to imagine Jesus as a babe in a manger, but as a full-fledged person of consequence in the family, community, religion and nation into which he was born, and our annual commemoration of the birth of the Messiah must be done!

At the Nativity we rejoice at the arrival of the long awaited Christ Child into our world. But the mere birth of a child is only the smallest beginning. In order for Jesus to be “like his brothers and sisters in every respect ...” he, as all human children do, would require a great deal of nurturing, maturing and enculturation to reach a functional status in adulthood. Since he was born into a devout Jewish family, the culture of which he was to become a part had a time-honored process by which he could be properly introduced and included. As a male child, he had to be circumcised and named on the eighth day after his birth. As the first born son, he was claimed by ancient writ as belonging to God. A Levitical provision allowed for him to be redeemed the thirtieth day after his birth for five shekels, freeing him to pursue a non-religious course in his life. On the fortieth day, he was to be presented in the Temple at the same time that his mother received her release from post-birth confinement, called her purification, allowing family life to return to normal for the first time in several months, a result of the many restrictions placed around pregnancy and birth. Luke tells us of the possibility of one final step into full enculturation when he relates the story of Jesus in the Temple at twelve, possibly his bar mitzvah.

We can easily recognize analogous stepping stones in the processes of our own enculturation in to twentieth and twenty-first century American life. Birth, Baptism, first birthdays, kindergarten, Confirmation, graduation first from high school and then perhaps college or trade school, just to name a few. Milestones of similar configuration are essential for the achievement our full human potential in whatever culture we accidentally find ourselves situated. That Jesus also passed through them insures that he is, in fact, like us in every way. When I was in college, we had a psychology professor, whom I have come to believe, had a deep and pervasive understanding of the importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation. She often manifested this devotion by asking questions about Jesus’ humanity which shocked the sensibilities of her more religiously conservative students. Questions like: How long did it take Jesus to be toilet trained? or; Was he a teen-aged rebel when he stayed behind in the Temple? or; Did he ever have a crush on a girl? Her intent, I’m sure, was

not to shock but to challenge her students to take such questions seriously enough so that they would grapple authentically with the idea that the savior of the world was, and had to be fully human in every way that we are, in order to do the work he was sent to do. Only a savior who is fully human can have the power, authority and credentials necessary to be the savior of all humanity.

So, it's the end of Christmas. But like most endings, it is also a beginning, the beginning of the revelation of Jesus the Christ to the world. Up until the Presentation in the Temple, the number of people who were aware of the presence of the Son of God was small, indeed. Mary, his mother, Joseph, his guardian, Elizabeth, his cousin, and a nascent John the Baptist, some unnamed shepherds, and that was it! As the required rites of incorporation and the return to normalcy are accomplished, the Good News could no longer be contained. First old Simeon, graced by the word from the Holy Spirit recognizes the month-and-a-half old child as the longed-for Messiah. And in the midst of the temple crowd, begins to prophesy about the destiny of this child and his mother. Another prophet, Anna chimes in with her praise to God, telling all who gather around her about the importance of the child in their very presence. The secret is no more! It is Jesus' coming out moment! As Simeon says: "For all the world to see. A light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of your people, Israel." With the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple and the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin, we are witnesses to that moment when the light of Christ breaks out. It has, now, like Mary, escaped its confinement. It is loose in the world for all to see.

Which now brings us to the third name for this feast, Candlemas. Candlemas is an add-on to the original feast which we joyfully embrace as traditional. It has grown into a profound profession of faith and commitment that makes excellent theological sense. Originally a simple blessing of candles to be used throughout the year, it soon became a testimony to the truth that the light of Christ has been released into the world. The candle we receive, light and carry in procession is token of the internal light of Christ which we are given in baptism, which is renewed in confirmation, and which we are all called to show boldly in our day to day lives.

The mystery of the Incarnation of God, which is our central focus during the Christmas season is only the beginning. The humanity of Christ is determined by his own complete and voluntary participation in the human condition. The incarnation of God in Christ is more fully attained when those who have taken on Christ as their Lord and Savior carry his light into all corners of their world. This is an individual calling which is amplified and even perfected in the small, normal activities of our daily lives. And that is the message to take away from Candlemas. We all carry the light of Christ and in the words of the old Sunday school song: Let it shine, let it shine, all the time.

Amen.