

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus; You came into this world as a baby, and You grew up as one of us and lived and died for us. We wonder what You think of our world today, full of sin and evil everywhere and a continuing testimony to human ignorance and selfishness. We confess our part in this and ask You to bring us to a place of repentance for our sins; guide us into Your truth and teach us how to live by Your light, we pray; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for the many blessings you have received from others in the past few days

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray for the community of your church and ask the Lord to bless it with a true spirit of worship and love*
- *Pray that scandals will not de-stabilise Northern Ireland*
- *Pray for those who are struggling because of the weather*

Meditation

Jesus, child of Bethlehem
and Saviour of the World;

You are the hope of my soul
the King of my life;

You are the ruler my mind
the judge of my integrity;

You are the carer of my soul
the comforter of my heart;

You are the guide of my existence
the planner of my journey;

You are the director my morality
the tutor of my discipleship;

You are the advocate of my faith
the sponsor of my eternal life;

Glory be to You, child of Bethlehem
Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son.

Bible passage – Luke 2:21-24

²¹ After eight days had passed, the time came for His circumcision, and He was named Jesus, the name given to Him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²² 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 ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male must be consecrated as holy to the Lord'); ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'

Bible Study

Review

Our passage today is part of what is generally known as the 'Presentation in the Temple', lasting from Luke 2:21 to 39. It is easy to roll together all the elements of these verses into one, but this would be to misunderstand the significance of each recorded episode in what is really a complex sequence of events. Today's reading contains the first two incidents of a total of four, as this table shows:

1. Luke 2:21 The circumcision of the baby Jesus, according to the Law for all children, on the eighth day since His birth (Leviticus 12:3).
2. Luke 2:21-24 The 'blood' purification ritual for a woman after the birth of a male child, according to the Law, on the thirty third day after the birth (Leviticus 12:4f.). At the same time, the dedication and redemption of a first born male child, according to the Law (Exodus 13:2,12).
3. Luke 2:25-35 Jesus' reception into the Temple by the holy man Simeon, and his prophecy of the work of Jesus as God's Messiah (2:29-32, historically called the 'Nunc Dimitis' according to the first two words of the prophecy in Latin).
4. Luke 2:36-38 Jesus' reception into the Temple by the prophetess Anna, and her witness to all that Jesus was 'the redemption of Jerusalem'.

Most people are familiar in principle with the stories about Simeon and Anna, and the previous two incidents in our reading today become lumped together in our minds as legal requirements concerning Jesus' birth. People today present their children at church for baptism or dedicated (according to church tradition), and unless there is some dispute about what is done, everyone regards the event as a happy occasion of thanksgiving for the birth of a child. Our main problems with this today is the great division between Christians about the practice of baptism, but no one disputes appropriateness of bringing a child into the community of God's people to give thanks to God for the miracle of birth and the creation of a new life.

Presenting a child to God has been a part of Biblical tradition since the earliest of times, but there is more to it than meets the eye. In order to understand the two different events described in our reading today, we must be willing to delve into the world of Jewish practice based upon some of the earliest experiences of the Israelite people.

God's covenant with His people was forged with the forefather Abraham (Genesis 12 to 17), and God told Abraham that all male children should be circumcised eight days after birth (Gen 17:12f.), the sign of the covenant for all Jews. So Jesus was brought for circumcision on the eighth day (2:21), but this verse is strange for another reason, because it says that Jesus was named when He was circumcised. This was not the usual practice, for children were usually named at birth by the father; but Joseph was not Jesus' father! Jesus was given His name not by Mary or by Joseph, but by the angel Gabriel before He was born (1:31); so here, Jesus' name is confirmed, not given, as verse 21 makes clear.

The second event (2:22-24) took place about a month later, and this was the ritual purification of Mary (and Jesus). The natural blood released during and after childbirth rendered a woman and a child ritually 'unclean' for one month, according to the 'Law' (see Leviticus 12). Mary and Joseph offered the sacrifices specified (2:24), but they were the smallest acceptable, indicating that they were very poor. There is one further matter of importance in these verses, however. Every firstborn was to be 'consecrated as holy to the Lord' (2:23); and the child was purchased back by its parents for the redemption fee of five shekels (Numbers 18:15), but Mary and Joseph did not pay the redemption fee!

This is remarkable! Jesus' Father, Almighty God, paid the redemption fee for Him when He died on Calvary! Mary and Joseph were not ignorant of these things; they had the courage to follow through each part of what was expected of them in a correct manner. Their child was different from all others. He was Jesus, the Messiah, God's Son and the Saviour of the World.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The rite of circumcision and the naming of Jesus
- The purification of mother and child in the Temple
- The redemption of the first-born in Israel

Notes on the text and translation

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V22 *'when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses'*

Other translations:

'when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses' (King James)

'When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed' (NIV)

I must draw your attention to the fact that most versions of the Bible except the King James version talk about '*their purification*', where the King James says '*her purification*'. According to the laws as found in Leviticus, these laws required the purification of Mary alone, so it is rather awkward to read that almost all the ancient texts of the New Testament read '*their purification*! So, who should be purified apart from Mary? Unable to answer this question, those who translated the Authorised version changed the text of Scripture. Later versions have kept the translation correct according to the Greek text, but leaving us with a quandary about who is meant here. It is a quandary that has never been resolved!

We can read such things in Scripture and say 'that doesn't matter'. However, if we believe that every word of Scripture is important, then even a small thing like this must have some significance. Matters such as this give some scholars great cause for concern, even though most Christians read them and would not know there was a problem!

Going Deeper

The rite of circumcision and the naming of Jesus

The rite of circumcision was given to Abraham as a physical sign of being one of God's people. Since Jesus has now died and been raised by God, the church has accepted that this sign has been superseded, and is no longer required. This matter is something that was argued about extensively in the life of the early church, and it became a veritable 'battle-ground' between Paul and the so-called 'Judaisers'. Paul argued that those who had faith in Jesus Christ were set free from all ritual law because of Jesus' love for those He has saved (e.g. see Galatians 3). The Judaisers argued that God's law revealed through Moses stood for all time. It was a powerful argument, but as history has shown, the church came to understand and accept that whilst God's MORAL law stood for all time, the practical and religious details of the RITUAL law were transient, and completed by Christ. The whole of the letter to the Hebrews is a detailed reasoning of this very argument.

It is significant therefore, to notice that these issues are raised even here in a very early section of Luke's Gospel. When Luke's Gospel was first read, the verses in our passage would have created great interest, because they would have been seen as commenting on these very issues. Luke was keen to tell people that Jesus fulfilled the laws of Moses, but the more we read through these verses, the more we realise that He was not a slave to them, rather, He changed their meaning for all people to come.

The fact that Jesus was named by Gabriel (1:31) before he was born, flies against all Israelite tradition. Nevertheless, this small fact ties Jesus closely to John the Baptist, whose name was also given to his father Zechariah, before he was born (1:13). If, for a moment, we place ourselves in the position of Joseph, then we may begin to understand what this may have meant to him, and this brings out the full impact of God's naming of His own Son. We are not told much about Joseph in Luke's Gospel, but he was extremely brave to bring Mary and Jesus into the Temple for the ritual of circumcision and naming. This act was usually done in the main courtyard of the Temple where men worshipped, and women remained outside in the courtyard of 'women and gentiles'. By bringing Jesus into the main courtyard, Joseph accepted as his own the child he had been given by God through his betrothed, Mary, even though they had not conceived him. Also, he had the responsibility of stating the child's name to the priests who performed the ritual of circumcision. By saying 'Jesus', he accepted an amazing relationship with God whereby he would raise God's Son on earth until he was ready to do the work of His heavenly Father.

It is probably wise that we know little of what happened in Jesus' early years; our prying eyes would be prone to reading too much into the utterly unique and unrepeatable human contract between one man and his God.

The purification of mother and child in the Temple

The purification of women was a different matter. Thirty three days after the birth of a child (Lev 12:4), women who lived near Jerusalem, or were near there because of the circumstance of their lives (as in the case of Mary and Joseph), went to the Nicanor Gate on the east side of the courtyard of women in the

Temple, where the ritual was performed. It was considered to be a privilege to take part in this ritual, for by it, a woman was admitted back into normal social life after the birth of a child. The rules for this ritual are set out in Leviticus, and are as follows:

When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean. (Leviticus 12:6-8)

This appears to us to be somewhat arbitrary, because it is hardly possible for a mother to give birth without the spilling of blood and the whole ritual seems like punishment for a sin. It is better if we look at it in a different way, however, which is closer to how the people of Jesus' day would have thought of it. All life belongs to the Lord, and in the same way, all blood therefore belongs to the Lord; the 'life' was in the 'blood'. Any accidental loss of blood was therefore regarded as like accidental sin, for which a sacrifice had to be made to obtain God's forgiveness.

It is impossible to evaluate exactly why Mary and Joseph were unable to afford more than the minimum sacrificial offering; it seems clear that they were poor, but does this mean that Joseph and Mary had been thrown out of their respective families because of the scandal of her pregnancy? We do not know, but it was not uncommon for young couples to lose all inheritance if their marriage was not accepted by their families.

The redemption of the first-born in Israel

The redemption of Israel's firstborn is possibly a more serious matter than the two previous issues. The redemption of Israel by God through death when they left Egypt and began their epic journey to the 'Promised Land' was a defining moment in the life of Israel (see Exodus 12-14). Much of the ritual law enacted in this famous incident is difficult for us to understand, but some of it can still help us. It was common in ancient times for the first-born child, especially a first-born son, to have special significance in a family, and this was true in most ancient culture. Indeed, it is true in many cultures even today.

When God's angel of death struck the first born of all Egypt (Exodus 11:4f.), this was the worst imaginable punishment that God could inflict upon anyone. It was given to Egypt because of the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh who refused to allow the people of Israel to leave Egypt, and his rejection of the signs of God's power and authority in the world. Israel was saved from this slaughter by placing the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the door-posts of their houses on the night of the slaughter by the angel of death.

In Israelite culture, the presentation of the first-born was an occasion for remembering God's gracious act of redemption by which Israel was saved and made into a nation (Exodus 12, see also the beginning of chapter 13). The purchase of the first-born son (five shekels) was something a couple would have saved for, and which they would have given with pride and joy, as they identified with the history of salvation given to them by their God.

Luke's description is terse, and leaves us to conclude what happened. Mary's purification was dealt with in the proper and correct way, but even if they did not have the redemption price for a first-born son, the payment of this redemption price was not required. Joseph could not be expected to pay for a first-born child that was not his! The lack of the redemption price begs us to think that God will have to pay this price at some point in the story of Jesus. Of course, we who know the story well know that this will come when Jesus dies of the Cross, but those who first read this Gospel would have realised instantly that here, Luke was indicating something of the nature of what God was going to do in the life of Jesus, His Son. God had named Him as the Saviour (the name 'Jesus' is similar to the word for 'salvation' in Aramaic and Hebrew), but the work was only just beginning.

Application

Bringing children to church when they are born is for most Christians, simply a matter of agreeing whether baptism or dedication is the 'right thing' to do. It is surely a pity that this subject is coloured largely by theological arguments about adult baptism; and the church has done little in recent times to help people understand more about what it means to bring a child to church after it is born.

From this passage of scripture, we can surely learn how important it is to bring a child to church after it has been born. Doing this is a way of making a public statement that a child is a gift of God and is part of the community of people who have been saved by God; they are part of His family. In past years, some believed that a child was inherently evil until it could make a confession of faith and therefore be received fully into the church through baptism. Such an attitude flies in the face of much Biblical teaching, firstly, Jesus' own

teaching that unless we become 'like children' (Matt 18:3f.), we will not enter the Kingdom. Secondly, the history of God's people in the Old Testament demonstrates that children in the family are an important part of the wider family of God's people, and are recognised as such from birth. God relates to them as children and understands them as they grow, perhaps better than adults do!

This passage has little to say about our modern problem with baptism, and whether or not it is appropriate for babies. One of the problems we have is that many families today are split and only one partner, husband or wife, is a Christian, and it is unwise to make assumptions about how a child can be brought up 'as a Christian' in such circumstances. However, scripture indicates that the dedication of a child to God in church is part of the wider mission of His people in the world, because it demonstrates the nature of God's loving 'family' to the world. Whenever the dedication of a child happens within an individual church community, it is done on behalf of the entire church of God for the one child. As a child grows up, he or she will grow into a world in which the church will appear to be tragically divided and torn; but hopefully, the acts of dedication and baptism (at whatever point this is performed within the life of the individual), will be clearly understood as done on behalf of the church 'universal'. They are not to be tied to any local or even national church. Being one of God's people is a statement about being different from the world, not about being different from other Christians!

The subject of the purification of women after childbirth has a different application. Like all ritual and sacrificial law, we can say with confidence that Jesus has fulfilled this on the Cross on Calvary, and this is why we do not need to bring first-born children to God for a special act of ritual 'redemption'. There is only one true redemption, and there is no 'symbolic' redemption within the church. Jesus was God's only Son, and God has paid the ultimate redemption price for all those who place their trust in Him. Mary and Joseph did not pay a price for Jesus when they presented Him in the Temple, and they set a new example for God's people.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look up Leviticus 12 and Numbers 18:15,16. What do you make of these Scriptures and how they connect with our passage?
2. What can we learn from the Old Testament religious 'rites' for the birth of children, and how might this be helpful to us in the church today?
3. Why do we not regard the firstborn in the same way today as they did in past generations? Is there any good reason why we should celebrate the firstborn child with special honour?

Topics covered by this text

- *Circumcision and the naming of children*
- *The rite of purification and its meaning in Scripture*
- *The rite of the redemption of firstborn and its meaning in Scripture.*

Personal comments by author

Bravery is something which is only required of us in rare moments of crisis, and we sometimes call people 'brave' when they have done something incredible. In this story, Joseph was exceptionally brave, establishing his family in the face of social conventions. Mary was also brave in standing firm despite the air of scandal that would have surrounded her presentation of Jesus for the rites of circumcision and purification. I sincerely hope that I would have the same bravery if it was required of me.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Are you aware of anything that the Lord is specifically asking of you at the moment? If not, pray and check out whether you have fully understood what the Lord is asking of you. If you are, then ask for the bravery to follow through what the Lord requires of you.*
- *Were you dedicated to the Lord when a child, and what does this mean to you? If you were baptised, what does this mean to you, and do you agree with what your parents did for you? If you were not brought to church when you were born, does this mean that you have lost out on anything, and if not, why not?*

Final Prayer

Your love, Lord God, surprises us. In the midst of circumstances in which we do not know what to do, You can bring out the best in us, inspire us to great things, and even lead us to acts of bravery. You do all of this because You love us; You want the best for us and You will do everything You can for us. Thank You. Lord Jesus: AMEN
