

February 1, 2004

The Presentation of our Lord in the Temple

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since the presentation of our Lord in the temple is an account found only in the Gospel of Luke (2:22-40), it seems reasonable to look at that narrative through the lens of Luke himself.

It is not hard to do. This is the story, after all, of the Messiah's first visit to the temple in Jerusalem, a site that Luke makes a foundation stone of his literary structure. Indeed, he begins and ends his Gospel in the temple (1:5-9; 24:52-53).

Moreover, near the end of Jesus' first visit to the temple, Luke remarks that the prophetess Anna "spoke of Him to all those who looked for the redemption in Jerusalem" (2:38). The real "redemption in Jerusalem" takes place, of course, in the last pages of Luke, describing the sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These are the events included in what Luke's original Greek text calls Jesus' exodos, "which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31).

Luke's story takes for granted the full significance of the temple. He presumes that the reader is familiar with the Lord's assumption of "residence" there shortly after its completion (1 Kings 8), His departure from it at the time of its destruction (Ezekiel 10), and His return there when the temple was rebuilt (Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 8-9).

Luke especially presumes the prophecy of the Messiah's coming appearance at the temple, an oracle found near the end of the last prophetic book of the Hebrew Scriptures: "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even

the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:1).

According to that same prophecy, the purpose of the Messiah's coming to the temple was to purify its priesthood: "He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness" (3:3).

It was those very priests, however, who failed to recognize the Messiah's arrival. On His final recorded visit to the temple, in fact, Luke tells us that "the chief priests and the scribes, together with the elders, confronted Him" (20:1). Their confrontation came in response to the purging of the temple in the scene immediately preceding (19:45-48).

Those sons of Levi wanted nothing to do with any purging. They had no use for what Malachi called the "refiner's fire" and "launderers' soap" (3:2). What, then, resulted from their confrontation with the Messiah? Luke tells us that "the chief priests and the scribes that very hour sought to lay hands on Him" (20:19). The temple was the site where this messianic drama was decided. It is surely significant, therefore, that Luke, in describing Jesus' words about Jerusalem's coming destruction, places that prophecy in the temple itself (21:20-24; contrast Matthew 24:3; Mark 13:3).

Such is the full literary context of Luke's story of the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple. It is a prophetic preparation for the redemptive events which will culminate at the end of the Gospel. The Lord is met by Simeon, an elderly man whom Luke describes with references to the Holy Spirit in three successive verses (2:25-27). Cast in the role of a prophet by these references, the inspired Simeon, after a canticle of praise, prophesies the drama that will ensue in the temple toward the end of the Gospel: "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that will be spoken against" (2:34).

It was "in that instant" that Simeon was joined by "Anna, a prophetess," who spoke of this Messiah "to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (2:36-38). This too, as we have seen, was a prophecy of the Lord's death and resurrection, for those things brought about that "redemption in Jerusalem."

Such, at the beginning of Luke, is the small company that welcomes the Messiah on His first visit to the temple. Upon these two old people comes an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, much as Luke describes in the beginning of Acts. Here too the Spirit descends upon a son and a daughter, a manservant and a maidservant, and they prophesy (Acts 2:17-18). Israel is well represented by these two figures who foster in their hearts the ardor of ancient hopes. But Simeon and Anna, even as they gave thanks to God for the Messiah's arrival (2:28-29,38), dimly foretell the drama that will later unfold in the courts of the temple.

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