

Presentation of Our Lord

February 2

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Malachi 3:1-4

Encouraged by Haggai and Zachariah, the Jews had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem (537-515 BC). But the promised prosperity did not appear; the people became despondent once more. Charging Yahweh with not keeping His promises, they grew careless in their moral and religious life. Many cast both Law and Worship overboard and fell into downright religious indifference. This sad state of affairs is reflected in the book of the prophet Malachi.

The book is dated between the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 BC and before 458 BC. Malachi is wholly concerned with the religious conditions of the Jewish community. With all his might he endeavors to stem the tide of religious indifference which must inevitably lead to ruin. He proclaims the approach of the day of Yahweh: His messenger is already on the way.

¹ Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me;

The Hebrew name *malachi*, from which the title of the book comes, means “my messenger”. The author here seems to be emphasizing how God intervenes in sacred history by speaking to Abraham, Noah, Moses and making covenants.

And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek, And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire,

Gold and silver are purified by melting and allowing the impurities to float to the surface.

or like the fuller's lye.

Also translated as "fuller's soap". A fuller is someone who increases the weight and bulk of cloth by shrinking and beating or pressing.

³ He will sit refining and purifying (silver),

See 1 Corinthians 3:13-15.

and he will purify the sons of Levi, Refining them like gold or like silver that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD. ⁴ Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD, as in days of old, as in years gone by.

When the abuses are eliminated the sacrifices will be as pleasing to God as they were in the time of David. Jesus' sacrifice was even more pleasing.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 2:14-18

The sacred writer of Hebrews is unknown -- which is why it is placed between Paul's writings and those of John. It is ascribed to Paul as far back as the end of the 2nd century in the church of Alexandria but Tertullian (AD 155-240) ascribes it to Barnabas. In any case, it has been accepted by the Church as inspired, although Martin Luther tried to leave it out of his Protestant Bible.

It is theorized that Hebrews was not written as a letter, but more as a theological treatise. The purpose was not to expound doctrine, but to ward off the apostasy that was a real danger to the readers. As such, it is much like a written homily. In our reading today, the sacred author explains how Jesus, although superior to the angels, became a human being so that He might offer the perfect sacrifice; opening the way so that man's sins might be forgiven.

¹⁴ Now since the children share in blood and flesh,

In the biblical sense, "flesh" means human nature considered in its weakness and frailty. As such, the "flesh" is contrasted with the "spirit" and God. The expression "flesh and blood" meaning "human being" occurs in the Old Testament only in Sirach (14:18; 17:26). When flesh and blood are separated, death occurs. Here, the sacred author speaks of human nature under the ban of death and sees death as associated with the devil. After all, death entered the world through the original sin of Adam and Eve.

he likewise shared in them,

God shared with them because He had a common union (communion) with them

that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,

Death was not part of God's original plan for man. By opening heaven and enabling the forgiveness of sin, God triumphs over the devil.

¹⁵ and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life.

The sacred author is not here talking about the apprehension we all have of the ending of this life, rather he refers to the erroneous conception that at death, man's relations with God were severed (Isaiah 38:18; Psalm 115:17-18). Because of Jesus' death and resurrection the nature of death was changed; heaven was opened and heaven became a means of passage out of the domain of sin into the domain of everlasting life and love.

¹⁶ Surely he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham;

In the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 22:18, God promised worldwide blessing to the descendants of Abraham. This was fulfilled in Christ and His sacrifice. We are Abraham's children; his descendants.

¹⁷ therefore, he had to become like his brothers in every way,

Since we are God's children, Jesus is our older brother; the firstborn who sets the example.

that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God

Jesus is the faithful high priest, He is worthy of our faith. The high priest, on the day of atonement, entered the Holy of Holies and offered sacrifice for the sins of the people and then exited. Jesus, our high priest, offered Himself on the altar of the cross and still makes this offering today in our behalf (Revelation 5:6).

to expiate the sins of the people.

This is the duty of the high Priest (Leviticus 16:15-16).

¹⁸ Because he himself was tested through what he suffered,

The testings of Christ which have qualified Him to help those who are undergoing temptation were not only the sufferings of His passion, but also the temptations He encountered throughout His life. He was totally true to His messianic mission: a mission which was always under attack.

he is able to help those who are being tested.

The temptation the sacred author is addressing here may be apostasy, but we must be conscious that every temptation to sin is a temptation to turn our back on God.

Gospel - Luke 2:22-40 (also heard on the Feast of the Holy Family, Cycle B)

Our Gospel reading for this feast stresses the holy family's strict obedience to the Law of Moses. Luke 2:21 says "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived." The requirement for circumcision is found in Genesis 17:12. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, a mark which designates that they belong to God's chosen people. Although not mentioned in the Gospel, Exodus 13:11-13 requires the sacrifice of all firstborn males (either of the flock or the family), with the provision that donkeys and sons shall be redeemed with a lamb, or if not redeemed its neck shall be broken. Numbers 18:16 states that the redemption shall take place at the age of one month (we are now at the 40th day since Christmas) and places a price of 5 silver shekels (a shekel is about 11 1/2 grams or \$10 at today's prices) as the price of redemption.

²² When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses,

See Leviticus 12:1-8.

they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,

There is no regulation in the Old Testament about presentation, but 1 Samuel 1:22-24 tells of Samuel

being presented in the Temple after being weaned. Perhaps this is Old Testament tradition which was practiced but not recorded.

²³ just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord," ²⁴ and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Leviticus 12:8, the offering of the woman who can not afford a lamb. One for a holocaust of adoration, and the other as a sin offering.

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon.

"Simeon" means "Yahweh has heard (?)". The Greek form is "Simon".

This man was righteous and devout,

Denotes care in observing the moral obligations of the Law.

awaiting the consolation of Israel,

According to the rabbis, this denoted the final, unrecorded words that passed between Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:11) and that which would be made known when Elijah reappeared.

and the holy Spirit was upon him.

God is at work in saving His people.

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. ²⁷ He came in the Spirit into the temple;

Although not a priest, Simeon (and later Anna) represent the heart of the temple cult--faithfulness to God.

and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, ²⁸ he took him into his arms and blessed God,

The rabbis took children into their arms to bless them.

saying: ²⁹ "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word,

Simeon, the faithful watchman, can be released from duty.

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."

This reflects Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 52:10. Salvation is universal, not just for the Jews. John often uses light as an image of revelation, brought from darkness to light.

³³ The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; ³⁴ and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted

The goals and goodness preached and practiced by the Messiah, will force men to face up to their great sinfulness (their fall). This knowledge can completely destroy, as it will the proud; or it can prompt the humble to turn to the Messiah and through Him to rise to a new life. The Greek word for "rise", *anastasis*, is used by Luke elsewhere exclusively to denote resurrection from the dead.

³⁵ (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

The sorrow experienced by a humble person because of the demands of an exalted vocation.

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna,

Means "grace, favor." A prophetess witnessed to God's will, at least by holiness of life, sometimes by speaking in His name. Rabbinical literature recognized seven (as a symbolic number) prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Hannah (Samuel's mother, 1 Samuel 2:1), Abigail (wife of David, 1 Samuel 25:32), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Esther. Holy Scripture also mentions Isaiah's wife as a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3).

the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

"Phanuel" means "face of El (God)". The tribe of Asher had the territory north of Mount Carmel on the Mediterranean coast after the entrance into the promised land, the area later occupied by the Phoenicians. In the blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49:20) and the blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33:24-25) the tribe is described as very prosperous. It is mentioned as one of the tribes which answered the summons of Gideon (Judges 6:35; 7:23).

She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four.

Or "for 84 years". In the latter translation, this would make her 104 years old which would place her symbolically in the person of Judith, the devout widow who lived to 105 (Judith 16:23). Both Jewish and Christian tradition found an honorable place for widows in the service of the community.

She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

Here, the city is representative of all the elect, those who will find themselves in the Heavenly Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong,

This points to the necessity for Jesus' "hidden" life as a child: He must grow strong in the full experience of a human nature.

filled with wisdom;

God's all-embracing plan of salvation.

and the favor of God was upon him.