

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE PRESENTATION OF OUR LORD – YEAR C



The Feast of the Presentation (Candlemas)

The Presentation of Jesus (2 February), also known as the Purification of the Virgin or Candlemas, falls on the 40th day after Christmas. It is a pivot point in the year, where we turn away from the festivities of

Christmastide and look towards the cross, and beyond that to the empty tomb. Traditionally, candles to be used during the year were brought into the church on this day to be blessed, hence the name 'Candlemas'.

Second Reading Hebrews 2: 14–18

Hebrews is not really a letter in the conventional sense of the word. It is an exhortation, possibly a written sermon with an ending that reads like a letter. It is not addressed to any particular church and does not seek to solve a specific problem or issue. Its audience is Jewish Christians, probably living in difficult times soon after the destruction of the Temple c.70 BC. They faced potential dangers from both the civil authorities and traditional Jews. With the destruction of the Temple, they have lost their bearings and need reassurance.

Although Hebrews is always grouped with the letters of St Paul, scholars are now convinced that Paul was not its author. Style, vocabulary, composition and other technical features all suggest a Greek Jewish Christian, conversant with Hellenistic rhetoric and philosophy. The inspired quality of the letter has always been accepted.

Today's passage speaks of the meaning of God's Son coming to live among us as one of us. Hebrews sees the Good News in Jewish terms: Jesus Christ is the high priest. He shares our flesh and blood: that is our human nature, but whereas Levite high priests were expected to be trustworthy, the author emphasises here a new quality in the priesthood of Christ, that of compassion. Before Christ, people sinned and so separated themselves from God. They would then offer sacrifice to be reconciled with God. Christ's death ends this cycle: since he takes sins on himself, there is no break in our relationship with God even in death. Christ has taken away 'all the power of the devil, who had power over death, and set free all those ... held in slavery ... by the fear of death' (vv. 14–15).



Gospel Luke 2: 22–44

The story of the Presentation of the Lord is one of the few passages in Luke's Gospel giving us information about Jesus's childhood. Gospels are not traditional biographies; rather they focus on aspects of Christ's life and teaching.

Here the focus is on showing that Jesus and his family were law-abiding Jews: indeed, the Law of Moses is mentioned four times in this short passage.

When the day came for them to be purified

According to Leviticus (12: 2–8), a woman was impure for 40 days after giving birth to a boy (80 days for a girl). After this they were required to go to the Temple and offer a sacrifice to be purified.

The parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

There seems to be no requirement for presentation of a boy to the Lord in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), but it could be that Luke was reminded of what happened to Samuel (1 Samuel 1: 19–28). Indeed, there is another example where Luke draws close parallels between Hannah and Mary, as he recounts Mary saying the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46–55) – similar to Hannah's song before dedicating her son Samuel to God (1 Samuel 2: 1–10).

Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord

This is a reference to the Book of Exodus (13: 2, 15). Every first-born male 'belongs' to God in a special way and is dedicated to serve him, recalling the Lord striking the first-born of the Egyptians, but saving the male children of the Jews. It was customary for a father to 'buy back' his son(s) by paying a fine of five shekels (Numbers 18: 1–16), though Luke does not mention this here.

A pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons

This is the sacrifice required from poor people. Wealthy people had to give a lamb (Leviticus 12: 8).

There was a man named Simeon ... he looked forward to Israel's comforting

The notion of 'comforting', sometimes also translated 'consoling' (as in Isaiah 40: 1), can refer either to the End of Times or simply to freedom from Roman oppression.

'Now Master, you can let your servant go in peace'

These verses, often called by their Latin name 'Nunc Dimittis' are prayed every day by those who say the night prayer of the Church. They recall verses from Isaiah (52: 9–10, 49: 6, 46: 13) and stress the universal nature of Christ's salvation, pagans included.

Anna, the daughter of Phanuel ...

Anna is an aged prophetess, and the first of several devout widows mentioned by Luke (cf Luke 18: 3; Acts 9: 36). Like Simeon, she is a representative of the *anawim*, the poor of Israel who trust in God alone. She praises God when she meets Jesus, speaking of the deliverance of Israel.