

A Routine Visit, a World-changing Revelation

(Luke 2:22-41, Hebrews 2:14-18)

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In today's Luke reading, we catch up with Mary and Joseph as they're completing the customary religious procedures after a baby boy was born. On the 8th day had come circumcision and naming, and now after a month or so came the obligatory redemption of the first-born male. As Exodus put it, 'All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord. ... But redeem (that's 'buy back') every firstborn among your sons.' You did that by making a payment to the priest. The purification of the mother was also important. After that she was ritually clean to resume normal life. It seems Mary and Joseph did these two things together at the temple, before they planned to return to Nazareth.

Sentimental holy pictures notwithstanding, Jesus's family were not treated as VIPs on arrival at the temple. In a world which generally regarded wealth as a sign of God's blessing and favour, they didn't cut it. We know that because in verse 24 the two pigeons they paid was the poor people's concession rate under the law.¹ It meant that even the poor could fulfill their religious obligations. Sacrificial pigeons were cheaper than lambs. Pigeons also were thought to represent meekness.

Today, the ceremonies for which Jesus's family were attending the Temple become almost secondary, just as sometimes in our routines, unscripted events take over. We don't even know the name of the essential priest on duty that day. But we meet Simeon and Anna. They knew their prophets, and they'd been expecting the Messiah to come.

Simeon is the first person we meet. He's not a priest, and as far as we know, he held no leadership position. But he was known as righteous and devout. He's also attuned to the Spirit, who led him to the temple that day. Sometimes we don't know why we feel an urge to do a particular thing right now instead of tomorrow, but it still happens.

We don't know how long Simeon hung around for, or how many other families walked past him while he watched and waited, but somehow he recognised that the baby brought in by Mary and Joseph was why the Spirit had led him there. He approached them, and presumably asked for a hold of the baby. Then came his remarkable testimony, preserved for us here, which some of us old-timers might remember as the Nunc Dimittis. If I'd been Simeon, I would have been tempted to stop with the happy stuff, the light and the glory. But there's more. Lest anyone think that the Messiah meant the immediate end of all conflict, he forewarns of division, adding 'Jesus is the means by which many will be lifted to new life, and there will also be much opposition, at cost to Mary in particular.' We don't usually want to talk about troubles ahead when someone has a baby!

The second unscripted testament comes from the elderly Anna. She was recognized as a prophet, at a time when there weren't many women prophets, let alone 84 year old ones. It's thought she may be descended from a prophet, as her father's name, given here as Penuel or Phanuel, means 'face, or vision, of God.'

¹ Lev 12:8

Anna approaches the family and gives thanks for Jesus. She then becomes one of the first to proclaim his identity to a wider audience. It says she spoke about it ‘to all who long for Jerusalem’s redemption.’

There’s no indication that Mary and Joseph had expected any more from their temple visit than coming away afterwards knowing they’d fulfilled their religious duty. But although Malachi and other prophets make it clear that ritual observances mustn’t replace compassionate living, sometimes God still chooses to work through them. The late Agnes Sanford, an American Episcopalian with a long-running healing ministry, told how she had continued attending weekly communion services for several years while suffering illness and depression, although she had little understanding of why she was attending. Later, she believed it was the faithful prayers of the people each side of her in those services which saved her life, and led to her recovery and subsequent ministry to others.

Through their contact with Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph heard more about Jesus’s unique role. It couldn’t have been bigger. Jesus brings deliverance for all people. Yes, all kinds of people. There were deep divisions between first-century Jews and Gentiles. Members of both communities found it hard to understand that God’s plan for them could come from a group they wouldn’t mix with. There was some trade between them, as necessary, but you couldn’t eat together and you couldn’t go into business together. You couldn’t really be friends.

Yet it should not have surprised anyone who knew the Hebrew scriptures that through the Jewish people would come salvation also for Gentiles. You couldn’t read Isaiah without coming across it, notably in the last chapter where it reports, ‘I will gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will all come and see my glory.’ The word for all nations, *goyim*, refers to non-Jewish, or ‘foreign,’ nations. Simeon picks up the same thread, identifying Jesus as the long-awaited salvation for all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles. Later, more prominent Gentile visitors, the Magi, will convey a similar message.

God’s salvation still crosses boundaries. In our interactions, both here amongst each other and outside with those different from ourselves, an onlooker should discern that we recognise the intrinsic value of others, and would want what’s best for all. If so, we’re achieving something very worthwhile in these times. Sometimes on the busses, or in public places, it’s possible to nicely come in to intercept someone’s being hassled, perhaps targeted for being visibly different.

Actually, running interference can be quite fun if we use our imagination! We can’t be best friends with everyone, but treating each as a person loved by God -that seems like a good starting point. And people notice. Even with Jesus, we can be sure that people would remember what they observed in his down-time. Most of his life would have been in the ‘everyday/routine’ category. Yes, Jesus is fully divine, with the power to save us from eternal death, but our Hebrews reading also calls him fully human. Jesus grew up absorbing the cultural identity he would need in his mission, which historically was mainly to his own people. I’ve sometimes wondered if it ever seemed strange that Mary needed to go through purification after giving birth to the son of God! Cultural identity would seem to be the reason for that.

Through this family's ordinary faithfulness, we see God's plan for the extraordinary salvation of the world, extending way beyond anything they could have imagined.

So how do we faithfully present Jesus within the culture of today's Australia? Jesus showed us how he did it in his environment, but he left us to work out the details for ourselves. How do we translate first century culture, or even that of our grandparents, as we draw on the Bible to teach our children and grandchildren?

We have the task of interpreting and reflecting the Biblical Christian faith for our own time, and in the places God puts us. That's both in our everyday lives, and in our religious observances.

May we be effective, faithful and imaginative speakers and doers, for Christ's sake.

Amen