

A Poor Family's Offering

This Week's Readings at Mass

- ▶ Malachi 3:1-4 • Messenger of the Covenant
- ▶ Hebrews 2:14-18 • Becoming Like Us to Save Us
- ▶ Luke 2:22-40 • The Presentation in the Temple

The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord today marks the trip that Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus made to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfill their duty according to Jewish Law. Observant Jews at the time of Jesus' birth followed the tradition spelled out in Leviticus 12:2-8. A mother was considered "unclean" for seven days after giving birth to a son. For 33 days, she was not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the temple. After that, she was required to bring a lamb and a small bird as an offering to the priest. The priest would then sacrifice the animals as an atonement for her sins. Only then was she declared ritually pure again. Those who couldn't afford a lamb and a bird, like Mary and Joseph, could bring two turtle-doves or two pigeons instead.

The language and rituals surrounding uncleanness, impurity, sacrifice, and atonement might seem primitive and archaic to us thousands of years later. Rather than judge them or find fault with such practices, we can focus our attention on the points Luke was trying to make in passing on this story. He is telling us that Jesus was born into a poor family that doesn't have a sheep to spare, nor the money to purchase one. However, this family worked hard to be faithful to their religious practices and to God as they understood him.

Whereas other Gospel writers focus almost all of their attention on male characters, Luke is careful to balance stories of men with stories of women in his life. Elizabeth and Mary were the "stars" of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel (not Zechariah or Joseph).



When Jesus is presented in public for the first time, Luke makes a point of stating that a man and a woman, Simeon and Anna (whom he calls a "prophetess"), both recognize the baby for the extraordinary person he is—the hope of the Jews and a light to the Gentiles (all of whom were not Jewish).

Questions of the Week

- 1 Think about some of the Gospel stories featuring women. Which ones stand out for you? Why?
- 2 Simeon and Anna recognize Jesus as someone who will be a positive force for people across religious divides. Who in modern history can you say the same of? What was it about them that made them appealing to people of different backgrounds?

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