

Temple & Transformation

a sermon preached at

Candlemass

the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

27 January 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lectons: Micah 3:1-4; Luke 2:22-39

The Jerusalem Temple is the epicentre of the showdown between Jesus and the religious and political establishment. The Temple is the location for today's action. The Temple is the place to which Mary and Joseph, as faithful Jewish parents, would naturally take their infant Jesus. Actually, in telling this story Luke has conflated two separate legal requirements in the Law – that first-born males be redeemed from the Lord, to whom they belong, through a sum paid to the Jerusalem Temple;¹ and that a mother be purified at the Temple 40 days after the birth of her child,² that number giving us the duration between Christmas Day and today's feast.³ In fact, only the latter required actual presence at the Temple. But from the point of view of Luke's narrative the Temple is the necessary setting for the prophetic encounters with Simeon and Anna.

The Temple, we recall, is the heart of the cult, the political, economic and religious centre of Judaism. And as we noted last week the Temple contains the Holy of Holies, the unutterable Divine presence – from which the Lord emerges in the person of the High Priest, God coming toward humans, setting the whole world free with the blood of the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Yet in spite of that tremendous Jewish breakthrough, the Temple remained tribal, the place of transaction, the place in which the Law was regulated and guarded.

Today's feast signifies the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."⁴ Today's feast foreshadows much that is to come in the gospel narrative: Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets,⁵ his overturning of the Temple tables,⁶ his prediction that the Temple will be destroyed,⁷ and his bodily enactment through life and death as the true Temple, the one not made with hands,⁸ That is to say, the Temple is to be the locus of transformation. "The Lord who will suddenly come to his Temple" comes not as sword-wielding potentate but as fragile child, as re-interpreter of atonement and threat to all religious and political power. Theology is being transformed into Christology. God is being revealed as Christlike, in whom there is no un-Christlikeness at all.⁹ The Temple itself is the vessel of that transformation, but no longer as a building. The Temple, rather, is the bodily flesh of the One who was in the beginning and who in his body is the fulfilling of the meaning of the Law and the prophets. The Temple, no longer a building, is to be the vessel not of law but of transformation.

What does all this mean for us? Well, as temples of the Holy Spirit - which was St Paul's great insight¹⁰ - we, too, are to be vessels not of law but of transformation. We, too, will have the thoughts of our hearts revealed. A sword will pierce *our* souls.¹¹ Christian discipleship is not a matter of believing certain things nor in being 'good', but is a momentous work of the heart and soul which results in conversion, in transformation.

¹ Exodus 13:1, 13:11-16

² Leviticus 12:1-8

³ Feast of the Presentation of Christ - 2 February

⁴ Malachi 3:1

⁵ Luke 13:34

⁶ Luke 19:46

⁷ Luke 21:6

⁸ Though not a Lucan tradition, nevertheless well attested: Mark 14:59; Matthew 26:61; John 2:19

⁹ Aphorism coined by the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:19

¹¹ Luke 2:35

Transformation is unmistakably the core of the eucharistic action. We do not come to eucharist in order to satisfy some religious rule. We do not come in order to make ourselves worthy before God, and certainly not to appease a stern father. We do not come in order to be 'good'. Nor do we come in order to learn some facts about the Bible or christian doctrines. And we certainly do not come in order to get a religious pep pill so as to keep us going for another week. Rather, we come to offer our very selves in eucharistic action in order that, like the Bread and Wine on the altar, we may be transformed into the real presence of Christ. The astonishing consequence of Incarnation is that we ourselves are to be vessels in the service of redemption, ¹² vessels of transformation. *We* are to be new temples!

What good is it to me, to borrow from Meister Eckhart, if Christ is presented as the new Temple which reveals heart and pierces souls, if I do not also present my very self as a new Temple for transformation of souls? ¹³ Such frail vessels though we may be, made of mere clay as St Paul observed ¹⁴, nevertheless temples made by God for the purpose of reconciliation, liberation, fulfilment, transformation – transformation, indeed, from one degree of glory to another; ¹⁵ lights for revelation to the nations and the glory of God's people Israel. ¹⁶

www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz

¹² Luke 2:38

¹³ "What good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and I am not full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son and I do not also give birth to him in my own time and my culture?" Meister Eckhart

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:7

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

¹⁶ Luke 2:32-32