

Year B Presentation of the Lord in the Temple / Candlemas

Malachi 3: 1-4

Hebrews 2: 14-18

Luke 2: 22-40

Purification

We have just baptised Rosslyn and welcomed her into the family of God, and in to this congregation. It is always a privilege to perform this sacramental act, and I pray Rosslyn will grow in faith and be supported by all members of this congregation as she grows up. And after my last visit to chat with Anja, Alex and Rosslyn, I need to improve my knowledge of characters in children's television programmes. Luckily, I think Rosslyn will prove an able teacher.

Our Gospel reading was that fabulous story of Mary and Joseph presenting themselves in the Temple, forty days after the birth of Jesus. The reason for the visit was really to perform a rite of cleansing and purification, according to the laws given many centuries before and stated in Leviticus. A woman was deemed to be unclean after shedding blood in childbirth, and the specified time that must elapse before being able to attend a synagogue was forty days. The woman would have to present herself to the Rabbi and bathe in a pool and affirm she was now clean and pure.

I am not sure how the women would have felt in those forty days of prohibition from entering the synagogue – probably the matter didn't enter their minds as they would have been sleep deprived and concerned that their vulnerable baby survived those all so important first few weeks.

The notion of being unclean or impure, is hopefully alien to us. The very idea of labelling another person, made in the image of God, as unclean or impure, to be identified and set apart from their fellow humans, seems anathema to me. And luckily, it was abhorrent to Jesus.

Throughout His life, Jesus went out of his way to associate himself with those considered 'unclean' or 'impure' in their society; whether they be tax collectors, people possessed by demons, people with leprosy, prostitutes, or even a woman caught in adultery. Jesus intentionally went out of his way to be with and heal the impure, those ostracised by their society. With the woman

caught in adultery he drew attention away from her and onto himself – what did he write in the sand I wonder? – so as to spare her life.

When we start to label people, to consider them so different from us that they can be dehumanised, then we have got things seriously wrong. Jesus looked into the eyes of each person he met and saw a beloved child of God and had compassion for them. He helped people regain their place in their society; he humanised them.

We need to be alert to the human tendency to believe we are the pure and clean ones, the good ones. That tendency can lead us to search for the ones who are less good, so we can differentiate between us and them, and believe we are occupying the moral high ground.

May we be aware of these tendencies, and through prayer and guidance by the Holy Spirit, be alert to the temptations. May we work with the Holy Spirit, to not look for differences and believe we are better, cleaner, more righteous, or whatever, but to ask for peace in our hearts and the disposition to see everyone as a blessed and beloved child of God.

May we meet everyone with the same openness and generosity of those wonderful role models, Simeon and Anna.

Nick Bowry
2nd February 2024