

Sermon 31 December 2017

Luke 2:22-40

In the opening passage we see Jesus undergoing three ancient ceremonies which every Jewish boy had to undergo.

Firstly, circumcision. Every Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. And on that day he received his name.

Secondly, the redemption of the firstborn. According to law, (Exodus 13:2 – *‘Dedicate to me all the firstborn sons of Israel and every firstborn male animal. They are mine.’*), every firstborn male, both human and animal, was sacred to God. It recognizes that God gives life and for the sum of five shekels – almost a month’s pay – parents could, as it were, buy back their son from God. The sum had to be paid to the priests.

Thirdly, the purification after childbirth. When a woman had borne a child, if it was a boy, she was unclean for forty days, if it was a girl, eighty days. She could go about her household duties and daily business but she could not enter the Temple. At the end of that time she had to bring a lamb and a pigeon to the Temple as an offering. If she couldn’t afford a lamb, she could bring two pigeons. This was known as the offering of the poor’ and this is what Mary brought. Again, we see that it was into a very ordinary home that Jesus was born. This is important in terms of being able to relate to Jesus.

The next passage introduces us to Simeon. I have the utmost respect for Simeon, for this reason. Over the past few weeks we have talked about the common Jewish expectation of the Messiah. The Jews regarded their own nation as the chosen people, but they saw quite clearly that by human means their nation could never reach the supreme world greatness which they believed their destiny involved. Many believed that some great celestial champion would appear amongst them and lead their nation to greatness over all other nations. This figure would be some sort of warrior.

But in contrast to all that, there were a few people who had no dreams of violence and of power; they believed in a life of constant prayer and quiet watchfulness until God should come. All their lives waited quietly and patiently upon God. Simeon was like that. God had promised him through the Holy Spirit that his life would not end before he had seen God’s own anointed king. In the baby Jesus he recognized that king. Now he was ready to depart in peace and his words have become what we know as the Nunc Dimittis, one of the great hymns of our church. Simeon got it right. He bucked the trend of expecting a warrior Messiah and instead expected and waited for a prince of peace.

And so a whole new era was ushered in with the arrival of this baby, a new era in so many ways. Not only had the Messiah arrived, for those believing so, but Jesus brings us a new understanding of God. The new understanding embraces a forgiving God rather than a God of vengeance. The contrast between the God as portrayed in the Old Testament and that of the New Testament is quite marked.

It is a new beginning and how appropriate that we should be talking about new beginnings on December 31st! It is a time when we say farewell to the old and prepare to usher in the new, and as we do so, we look ahead with optimism and hope. We redefine our goals and dreams. New year resolutions!

I have here a new cricket ball. When a bowler has a new ball in his/her hands it is the start of a new innings. He is keen and rearing to go, he has plans – to have as many of those batsmen as possible walking back to the pavilion with a little quacker opposite their name in the scoreboard. We all need to be like that bowler.

Tomorrow a new innings gets under way. We put behind us this year and on with the new – positive, optimistic, determined. And the most positive thing we can do is to commit our goals and dreams to God. We have to do the hard work but by putting ourselves in his hands, we have a far greater chance of success. Let me finish with a few stirring words from the Book of Revelation, 21:5-7.

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Rev Warner Wilder

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