



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 3, 2002
The Solemnity of the Presentation

Solemn Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

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PRESENTED AND PURIFIED

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple is a major feast which occurs in the Epiphany season, but it is connected to Christmas and actually brings the observance of Christ's Nativity to a close. This feast also has another old title, the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin. Let us look at each title's meaning.

First and most obviously, there is the Presentation of Christ in the temple. According to the Law of Moses, every first-born son had to be dedicated to God in memory of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt at the Exodus, when the first-born sons of the Egyptians died and those of Israel were spared, or "passed over," by the angel of death. This Presentation of the son occurred forty days after the child's birth; thus the actual day, February 2, falls forty days after December 25. The Presentation required an offering to be made for the first-born son, an ongoing sign of the miracle of God's preservation of Israel since the Exodus up to the present moment.

It is worth noting that in the story of the Presentation by the Holy Family (told by Saint Luke 2:22-40), Mary and Joseph took the option offered by the Law for a poor family. The Law prescribed either a lamb, which was the rich family's offering, or, for the poor, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, as the offering to be made for the child.

Secondly, the ritual of Presentation included the rite of Purification for the mother, who had undergone the blood-shedding involved in childbirth. As a daughter of the covenant, she was delivered from the dangers of pregnancy and restored to a more normal, or at least less delicate, state. Of course, any parent, especially a mother, knows that the birth of a child changes everything, forever, whatever "normal" ever meant in the first place.

Present at the scene with the Holy Family were two old saints, Simeon and Anna, who prophesied concerning Jesus. Simeon said he could now die in peace, because he had laid eyes at last on Israel's Messiah. Our second canticle, the *Nunc Dimittis*, is the song of old Simeon's prophecy. He also said Jesus' career would mean the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and would pierce the heart of his own mother Mary. Anna gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Jesus to all who looked for Israel's redemption.

So it was, that when Mary placed her infant Son into Simeon's arms, the dispensation of the Old Testament encountered the new dispensation of the Gospel. Seen from the perspective of our

faith in Jesus Christ, we can see Christ, God's gift to our Lady, being presented and offered back to the Father by his Church, personified by Mary and Joseph.

If you think about it, we have here the image of the way Christians pray and worship and witness and work at all times. Looking far ahead from Christ's infancy, through Lent, to Holy Week, we come to Good Friday, where Jesus completes his self-offering. He takes us from his Presentation in the Temple to the Altar of the Cross.

When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, God revealed how it is that we have access, confidence of access, to him. This access was brought to perfection on Good Friday, when it was no wonder (as a sign of this new access) that the veil covering the inner sanctum of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. When Mary underwent the old purification rite as Christ's mother, she was prefiguring the purification all Christians receive as we learn more and more to live and grow in Christ.

In tonight's second lesson, the first epistle of Saint John, we heard the promise of the final installment of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in our own lives (as fellow inheritors with our Lady and Saint Joseph, Anna and Simeon, and all the saints):

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." Pure, we might say in conclusion, especially on this day when we vest new boy choristers, pure as a fine treble voice.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.