

FIRST AFTER CHRISTMAS

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REV'D GLENN MAYTUM

2020 has been a sort-of wake-up call to us.

The 20th century certainly contained many remarkable changes in science and medicine. In 1936 my grandfather died, aged 54, from tetanus, caused by a splinter in his finger. That is less than 100 years ago. Just think of the medical improvements we enjoy today.

And, what about the introduction of electricity, reticulated water, sewerage, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, air conditioning, transport, communications, and so on...

Compare these to how our grandparents and great-grandparents lived.

Our wake up call was that the world could not contain the plague of COVID 19 and we expected science and medicine to step up.

Interestingly, today's Gospel is written by Luke, the Doctor. He must have been well-acquainted with suffering and injury and illness, especially from his time spent with St Paul. I think Luke is very practical. Today he reminds us of something we have become complacent about: childbirth. This reading from Luke contains two different, but associated events. The King James Bible version makes them much clearer than the modern versions.

Both events involve Jesus AND Mary and Luke is the only writer to mention them. We get an interesting insight into the Holy Family. The family come to the Temple in Jerusalem and do TWO things: (as it says: first- "required by the Law of the Lord", and secondly: "required by the Law of Moses").

Jesus, as firstborn son, is presented to the Lord. Now, the usual thing that happened after that, as described in Numbers chapter 3, is that the parents would REDEEM (i.e. buy back) their child by paying the priests 5 shekels. But, this does NOT happen for Jesus.

The reading, in fact, begins by saying the days of Mary's purification had been accomplished. So, we see at the Temple, a sacrifice according to Leviticus 12, is offered.

This sacrifice is NOT about Jesus, but his mother, Mary. The "purification" is actually about Mary's return to society after her confinement after Jesus' birth. "Confinement" is an old-fashioned word. It means the woman who had given birth was required to withdraw from society. Because of blood, she was ritually unclean and could not attend the synagogue or be part of regular society.

No pictures on the hospital steps, those days!

And, as I understand it, it is still the requirement for Jewish and Muslim women, today.

Confinement lasted 40 days- QUARANTINE- another old word we have become used to using in 2020.

Today, due to improvements in medicine and science, childbirth is, to some extent, "ho hum". Until relatively recently, it was considered a very risky thing. We know from our Victorian-era novels how the husband was often called to make life-or-death decisions. Confinement was necessary for recuperation. These days it is called "maternity leave".

Then after confinement, the mother returned to society, to thank God for safe delivery, at the major meeting place- in this case the Temple- so that it became public knowledge. This is what was happening here, for Mary.

What do we see about the family?

There was Joseph. I wonder how he was feeling? Because Leviticus actually says the Thank Offering for the mother's safe return was to be a sheep. But, "if she cannot afford a sheep then two turtledoves or two pigeons" could be offered, instead. This is a very poor family. Joseph was (in Greek) a "tekton" an "artisan" traditionally probably of wood, but maybe even of stone. He did not own land. He was, as the Catholic Church refers to him, "St Joseph the Worker". A labourer, not an owner. He could not even afford the actual sacrifice.

Then, there was Mary. Probably around 14 or 15 years old. We need to remember just how dangerous was pregnancy and delivery- particularly to a very young girl. She went through the pain and suffering and danger and small town gossiping of the pregnancy to finally give birth to her son in the animal shelter in Bethlehem. No private birthing suite available then. Not even a room at the inn! Her participation in God's great plan and the great risk she took for our salvation, needs to be recognised.

And, there was the baby Jesus. A male child was highly desired because, in time, he would be expected to look after and protect the women in his family. So, Mary would have been very pleased.

In this story we also meet Anna, the childless widow, who lived in the Temple. Women were either looked after by a male relative or else they lived in a religious institution, or begged, or became a prostitute. Life was VERY difficult.

But, this baby Jesus was not redeemed for earthly work in his earthly family, but to do the work of His Father in heaven. Jesus is presented to God, for God's service. This baby Jesus was not only truly human but also truly divine.

From the beginning of Advent we have been on a journey of revelation from the ancient hopes of Israel through the announcement to Mary and the heavens singing and revealing Christ is born. In our reading today Mary comes to the Temple for rites of purification after the birth of Jesus. And, Simeon's further revelation concerning Jesus is the consequence of the visit.

The hard world of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is a world we, fortunately, do not now experience, even with COVID.

As I have stated previously, Mary was not some sort of plaster statue. She went through the pain of pregnancy so that her son might be born.

The heavens speak once more. People such as Simeon and Anna as well as you and I recognize and respond to the call of Jesus.

But, I think for our Gospel writer Luke, the Doctor, Mary's safe return to normal life needs to be celebrated with as great an enthusiasm as the presentation of Our Lord, in the Temple.