

Leviticus 12; Luke 2:21-38

New Year – and midnight in particular – is a special time. We call it a liminal space, the time in-between – it's not the old year any more but it's not the new year either. Limbo in between times, a moment all of its own. For us very often time of reflection on the past year and hoping, dreaming and planning for the future.

Mary was equally in such liminal space, in such limbo time as she went to the temple. In the Book of Leviticus in chapter 12 we read of the rites of purification after childbirth. A quick word of explanation would be in order. Uncleanliness is not the same as sin even though the woman is required to bring two birds for a sin offering. Sin means being unclean but being unclean doesn't necessarily mean sin. You could become unclean in those liminal spaces – in-between spaces – when life and death meet. You became unclean when preparing a corpse for burial, having a period or a skin disease or giving birth. Childbearing often meant that either the woman or the child or indeed both could die. Again – a liminal space between life and death.

40 days after giving birth to a boy or 80 days after giving birth to a girl one was to give an offering to God in the temple and dedicate the child to God. The time of vulnerability was over and the mother could from that point on take part in the communal and religious life of her society of the time.

So today we meet Mary, Joseph and Jesus at the end of such liminal space for Mary. They had circumcised Jesus 33 days before and now they're dedicating him and purifying Mary at the temple.

Before we go on allow me to digress a little. Did you know that the Holy Prepuce or Holy Foreskin of the newly circumcised Jesus was a relic in many churches believed to have miraculous powers? 1 January used to be – and in some churches still is – celebrated as the Feast of Circumcision of Christ.

There were up to 18 foreskins of Jesus to be found in various churches, including one in Stoke-on-Trent. Such number though indicated that most of them (any male child can only have one!), if not indeed all of them, were not authentic relics therefore in 1900 the Roman Catholic Church ruled that anyone writing or speaking of the Holy Foreskin will be excommunicated. The Second Vatican Council removed the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ from the church calendar.

I would go along with Voltaire though who, 'in A Treatise of Toleration (1763), ironically referred to veneration of the Holy Foreskin as being one of a number of superstitions that were "much more reasonable... than to detest and persecute your brother".'¹

Going back to our main story – from the clues in the Book of Leviticus we see that the family were middle-class. They couldn't afford a lamb for the offering, just the two

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Prepuce.

doves. However there was also provision for the poorest of the poor who were allowed to bring some flour instead.

In the temple Mary and Joseph meet two people from the establishment – a priest and a prophetess. What’s striking is that those two people in the twilight of their years appreciate the change that Jesus is heralding and bringing. They long for it and are delighted to see the signs of it coming. Many people in Jesus’ life will fight against this change and cling to the past – so many in our churches do too – but those two are full of delight and encouragement. Two selfless prophets, dedicated to God and his ways.

Also in later chapters we’ll read about representatives of the religious establishment who worked for themselves only, who abuse their power and the people entrusted to them. However those two people are positive examples of leadership in the temple. Which only shows that Jesus did not come to abolish the system, he didn’t come to fight against the people but the attitudes, selfishness and misconstruing of God’s Word.

It’s a powerful message for another reason too. Sometimes our experience affects what we expect from life. If we’ve been hurt, we do not expect healing. If we’re persecuted, we don’t expect freedom and respect. If we’ve been abused, we do not expect we have any value and that anyone can treat us as if we had. So a people under oppression do not expect to see independence and liberty encapsulated in a small child. It’s so easy to miss the signs when we’re used to not seeing them. The perception of Simeon and Anna was not clouded though. They longed to see the new day coming and they recognised it right away. It takes faith and courage to recognise blessing when one sees one.

I’d like to finish today with the story of Harriet Tubman who was an American abolitionist. Born into slavery, she escaped and later on helped many slaves escape into freedom also. The Rev Dr Ozzie Smith Jr. wrote thus about her in his sermon called ‘A Sight for Certain Eyes’: ‘It has been said that Harriet Tubman was known to wait in train stations without the aid of train schedules or knowing when the train was coming. When asked why she would do that, she simply said because she knew the train was coming. In an age where people want to know, in an age of GPS (...) and all information load, this may sound strange, but what does it mean to wait without a schedule but to be certain that the train is coming? Could it be that Tubman knew that the station was the place to be when waiting for coming trains? Might it have been that Tubman recognized that the tracks had already been laid outside the station for traveling beyond where her stationed eyes could see?’²

Tubman, like Simeon and Anna before her, was a great prophetess of her time. The tracks have been laid outside the station for travelling beyond where our eyes can see – for ourselves, for our church, for the world. Are we ready to catch the train when it comes? Amen.

² <http://day1.org/1125-sight-for-certain-eyes>.