

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Presentation of Our Lord

First Reading

Malachi 3:1–4

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 2:14–18

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 2:22–40

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into

the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

It isn't too difficult to imagine why, on the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple we should find this passage from Malachi that begins, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...” And yet the story of Jesus' presentation lacks all the rest of the imagery of purification that makes up the rest of Malachi's prophecy. I don't know about you, but Malachi makes me think more of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, especially in John 2. Here, by its inclusion among the readings for the Presentation, I feel encouraged to view this story as the one that Malachi foresaw. Frankly, I can't see it.

Earlier this (church) year, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we had this same passage from Malachi. I find that I don't have anything new worth saying. Rather than link to

that Divergence, I'll save you a click and copy/paste those thoughts here, with apologies for lack of originality.

(Copied text)

I cannot read this passage without hearing in my head the recitative and aria from the Messiah, "The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to His temple. E'en the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in..." and "For He is like a refiner's fire!" I sang that innumerable times when I was younger. Coloratura bass aria. What fun.

But now that I come to study it in its own right, I find that the messianic interpretation we've given it as Christians isn't what Malachi had in mind at all. This "messenger of the covenant" was likely intended by him to speak of the coming of a Levitical priest. Messianic, yes, but, and I did not know this, there were thought by some in Malachi's day to be two coming Messiahs. One of the Davidic line, and another, separate one from the tribe of Levi. Of course, we who follow Jesus have taken both those images and melded them into one in Jesus.

Without going into personal detail, my own prayer and meditation have given to me and understanding of the "refiner's fire" that Malachi speaks of. I have come to see this fire as both unquenchable wrath and irresistible love. Brennan Manning taught me a phrase for this, "fierce mercy." I'm not sure he meant it quite the way I do, but it still works. God's love for you, for me, is so fierce, burns so hot that nothing that stands between God and you, God and me, can withstand it. A refiner's fire.

I believe that when I mistakenly identify myself with things in my life that God's love will burn away, I tend to view that fierce mercy as wrath. When it warms me when I'm cold, or burns away that which harms me (think of radiation treatment killing cancer cells) I see it as more benevolent. But it's all the same thing. To me.

Second Reading

In our text from Hebrews for this week, the author is clearly making an argument about why it was necessary for Jesus to assume human form. In the midst of it, we have this bewildering comment, "For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham." While this is certainly true (one commentator on this passage suggested that this statement was a "truism" of the author's time) this doesn't explain its insertion into an argument that has nothing to do with angels.

Unless we read this with an eye to classical Greek to help us translate it more accurately. The verb *epilambanetai* is, for grammatical reasons, better translated as "seized by"

rather than “helped.” This is because the particle *de* (a form of speech in Greek we don’t have in English) comes closely after the subject to which it infers, which would be “the fear of death.” (...and deliver all those who through **fear of death** were subject to lifelong slavery.)

So, according to the work of Michael E. Gudorf, these verses read better this way:

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. 16 (*For it [the fear of death] clearly does not seize angels, but it does indeed take hold of the seed of Abraham.*) 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

I have to say that, to me, this makes a lot more sense than our current translations.

Here’s a link to Gudorf’s article, should you want to read it. It isn’t long but it’s not a very fun read. ([LINK](#))

Gospel Text

Our reading from Luke for this week introduces us to two characters who appear at Jesus’ presentation in the Temple and who never appear again. Many of us are familiar with Simeon. His song over Jesus, the *nunc dimittis* is familiar to a lot of us who have prayed the Daily Office at one time or another. “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...”

Less familiar is the person of Anna, the prophetess. As I think she’s the less well known and more lightly regarded of the two, I would like to focus on her for this Divergence. In my studies this week I came upon a fascinating article by Andres Garcia Serrano that helped me understand her place in this short story about the Presentation and its importance. I’ll provide a link to the whole article at the end of this section, as I cannot do it justice in this space.

What I learned is that, while Anna’s words are not recorded, her description in Luke (unusually long, especially for a minor character) and her actions make her a symbol for all of Israel. First, it is helpful to recognize how often Luke alludes to “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-55 of the book. In this portion of Isaiah there is often an alternation between Israel as a male figure and Jerusalem as a female figure. So in our reading for

this week the pairing of a male and female figure (something Luke does frequently elsewhere in the Gospel) begins to suggest that each represents a collective group, not just an individual.

But then we get the description of Anna. Luke is peculiarly interested in numbers here. Anna was married for seven years and is either 84 years old or has been a widow for 84 years. (The Greek is a bit ambiguous on that.) In either case, you can see the importance of these numbers. Seven is a number of completion or abundance and twelve is the number of perfection, the number of the Tribes of Israel. So we have Anna, married for seven (abundant) years and a widow of 84, or 7×12 . The indirect reference to the number 12 suggests that she may symbolize not just a city, but all the Tribes of Israel.

It doesn't stop there. (I feel like the guy on the television ad, "But wait, there's more!") Luke is careful to present three different stages of Anna's life, her youth as a virgin, her married life, and her life as a widow. These correspond to three stages of the life of the people of Israel that were written about by her sages; her youth as a virgin - the life in Egypt, her married life - from the time of the Sinai covenant and in the Promised Land, and her widowhood - from the time of the Babylonian Exile forward.

In addition, Anna's behavior becomes an exemplar of the life of Israel and her expectation of the redemption of Israel. She is constantly in the Temple in prayer. Her ancestry suggests that she is from a family that "sees the face of God." Her ancestor Phaniel's name is the Greek for Peniel, "for I have seen the face of God." (Genesis 32) Then she goes on to tell others about Jesus, those who long for the redemption of Israel. She becomes the first Christian evangelist.

I have long treasured Simeon's words in this week's narrative, but I have never appreciated the care that Luke used in describing the character of Anna, whose voice we never hear, but whose very being evokes the whole of the hope of Israel.

Oh, and here's the [LINK](#) I promised you!