

Mary in Scripture - Part 5 of 8 - At the Temple

Reading: Luke 2:22-28

Purification

Mary went through ritual purification after childbirth. This confirms that in the eyes of God and of the world, her purity was not some bizarre physical condition which set her apart from other women. Modern women have postnatal check-ups six weeks after giving birth. We think we are a scientific society that is no longer trapped in a superstitious worldview, but we over-look the fact that, as in Mary's case, we need some socially endorsed ritual that terminates the process of pregnancy and confirms that the woman's bodies have returned to their normal functions. Today, an obstetrician performs the task. In Mary's day, it was the priest within the context of a liturgical celebration.

In the past as a Christian body we even had a private ritual for women being 'churched', going to church for the first time after giving birth, but it no longer finds acknowledgement in the wider community. It was one of the rare occasions when the equality of the sexes promised in Christ was incorporated into Christian praxis, when the Church acknowledged our gendered bodies and incorporated the reality of those bodies into our spiritual lives. The rejection of ideas of ritual purity could have resulted in acceptance of the body with all its discharges and cycles and functions. The reality and acceptance of physicality was deeply enmeshed in the Jewish religious awareness.

Yet early Christianity followed the road of denial of the physical, the Greek dualism, the soul's yearning to escape the body. We do not need purification because we are loath to acknowledge that we have bodies at all. Yet our sacramental system proclaims the opposite, the sacramentality of physicality.

The Purification celebrates a woman's fertility. When Mary went to the temple with her baby son, the visit signified many things, but one of them was her public acknowledgement of her physical process of childbirth and fertility. All enduring societies provide their members with ways of making sense out of human living. Such ways of making sense out of life are systems of meaning.

Sacrifice of the Poor

Luke's account of the Presentation also reminds us that Mary and Joseph were poor. Leviticus instructs that if a woman 'cannot afford a lamb, she is to take two turtledoves or two young pigeons' (Leviticus 12:8). This is the offering that Mary took to the temple. Having offered herself entirely to God, having conceived by the Holy Spirit and given birth to the Son of God, the Mother of God still approaches God with the offering of the poor in her hands. There is so much to learn from this. Any image of God that is not rooted in the suffering and weakness of the poor is an idol that oppresses rather than liberates the human spirit. How strongly Pope Francis is asserting this point!

The gospels challenge us to look for Jesus among the poor, not in the sense of Western spiritual poverty that so adeptly averts the challenge to wealth, but in the concrete realities of poverty. Jesus' mother had no lamb to offer at the temple, but like Hannah before her,

she consecrated her firstborn Son to the Lord. Jesus was to be both shepherd and lamb. At his birth, his mother welcomed the shepherds with whom he would one day identify himself. At the Presentation, she offered the Lamb to the God he would call his 'Abba', though she had no money for a lamb. In some medieval paintings, Mary is depicted in priestly robes to indicate that in offering Jesus in the temple, she was performing a priestly function.

Simeon

Simon speaks of the laying bare of secret thoughts. What secret thoughts are laid bare when we contemplate this mother and her baby in the temple? Mary and Jesus were not confrontational, but as they lived out their ministry in the world, people found their own masks stripped away. There was something in their goodness, of the Mother and Child, that was piercing and purifying, that exposed the darkest intentions and desires of the human heart as well as the most generous acts of love and devotion. The violent power of Herod, the treachery of Judas, the political opportunism of Pilate, all these would be laid bare. And so it continues to our day.

The powers of history to our day ride out to conquer and destroy so many children, so many mothers, and all the evils of the world are laid bare. Yet there is light as well as shadow. There is the light of Elizabeth's greeting to Mary and the anointing of Jesus' feet by the woman of Bethany. There is the light of Joseph's love overcoming his reluctance to offer Mary and her child a home. There is the light of the two elderly patient figures of Simeon, righteous and devout, and aged Anna, herself a prophet whose actions speak louder than the words she does not speak, patiently waiting and recognising the salvation that is 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles.'

Anna

Anna was an older woman who had spent years in prayer, waiting for deliverance, a symbol of women everywhere who yearn and fast, and who wait through the history of unredeemed humanity, never losing faith, never losing the desire to speak out and to spread news of her hope and her vision. How much we might discover if we could interpret the message of this old woman, to glimpse the secret thoughts and unwritten history of her life, mother and grandmother, of her long years of widowhood and prayer, this prophet whose words are not recorded and are lost to us. Yet when Jesus was presented in the temple, a woman, a prophet, was there to welcome him. God promised through Joel (3:1) "Your sons and daughter shall prophesy."

Old and weary Anna stands beside the young mother of Jesus as figures that speak powerfully as women bringing to fruition this promised fragile sign of redemption, of praise to God, and a voice to speak what they have seen and been part of.

Simeon speaks of a 'sword' that is to pierce Mary's soul. Traditionally the 'sword' has been associated with the suffering of Mary at the time of her Son's crucifixion. But Luke's Passion account does not place the Mother at the Cross. Only John's gospel does so. Luke brings her in at Pentecost, but in Luke, the 'sword' has a broader reference. Mary will have to surrender her Son to a broader and more risky role – 'his Father's business' - that would entail the human experience of farewelling her child into what was to be a challenging and

hostile mission in which he would experience both acceptance and rejection, love and hatred.

Source

Beattie, T. (1995). *Rediscovering Mary: Insights from the Gospels*. Liguori Publications: Barnhart, MO.