



Sermon

Epiphany: The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Hebrews 2:14-18; Lk 2:22-40

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Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany - the season celebrating the revealing of the Son of God to the world. It culminates with this account of the presentation of the baby in the Temple 40 days after his birth – and today is 40 days since Christmas Day.

In the reading from Hebrews, we hear that Jesus identified with us by becoming flesh and blood, sharing in our humanity. We call that the incarnation. The eternal Son of God became fully human and lived a life on earth and died for us.

Three purposes of the incarnation are described in these three verses of the Hebrews passage.

- 1. He died as a human to make atonement for the sins of the people.**
- 2. He died as a human to free us from fear of death.**
- 3. He lived as a human so that he might help us.**

1. To make atonement for sin

To redeem us he had to be human, because the penalty for sin had to be paid by a human.

In being presented at the temple as an infant he was living the normal Jewish life. As the writer to the Hebrews wrote,

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.¹

Here was the redeemer himself being presented before God at the temple. This is what Simeon and Anna rejoiced about – even if they did not know the full wonder of it all. They had been given prophetic insight that this baby was the promised Messiah, the saviour of the world. They had long waited for this time trusting promises the Holy Spirit had revealed to them.

Joseph and Mary were fulfilling the requirements of the Law. Among other things they were there to redeem their firstborn back from the Lord. That ordinance went back to the Passover when the first born of Egypt died but the firstborn of Israel were saved by sacrifice of the Passover lambs.

¹ Heb 2:17

The sacrifice of those lambs saving the firstborn sons from death was a picture of the protection the Christ would give all his people. In Old Testament times, God allowed sheep, goats and cattle to take the sacrificial place of his Son until that time when the true sacrifice would be made at Calvary. They were like pointers to that one, powerful, effective sacrifice. There God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. There those animal sacrifices found their meaning and effective power. It's like a cheque. The paper has no value in itself. But it is a promise you make to pay money when it is presented. The animal sacrifices were like cheques written against the immense value of the sacrifice of the Son of God. At Calvary, they were presented and he paid them all.

And the result is that Jesus was able to deal with our sins. It is our sin which blocks our relating to God. When he paid the penalty for sin he dealt with that barrier.

2. To free us from the fear of death

Woody Allen the comedian, actor and film director summed up our uneasiness with death when he said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

Apart from this fear of the way of dying, most people fear death itself. Have you noticed how we try to hide it away so we don't have to face it? Up until the 1950s most people died at home and stayed there until the funeral. Now we have moved it to hospital and the body is not seen unless it is embalmed to look a bit lifelike. People don't want to say, he has died, but avoid it by saying he has passed away.

There are a number of possible reasons:

- a. We may fear oblivion, being snuffed out.
- b. Or we may fear not being snuffed out that there is a judgement to face and know that our sins are many.
- c. Perhaps we fear the separation from those we love.
- d. Then there may be the fear of the unknown – what will it be like if there is an afterlife?

For believers in Jesus Christ these fears are answered.

- a. **Fear of Oblivion:** Jesus assures us that there is life after death. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." ²

Or again, he answers the claim of the Sadducees that there is no resurrection with this argument:

"... about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." ³

His logic is that when God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush he referred to the himself in the present tense as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were all long since dead. But to God they are alive, for to him all are alive. ⁴

- b. **Fear of Judgement:** This is answered in the atonement. Because Jesus has dealt with our sins, when we put our trust in him for salvation, we need no longer fear judgement. Atonement means at-one-ment. We are made at one with God.

Death has no sting or victory for believers because sin, which gives death its sting, has been paid for by the death of Christ, our champion.

² John 11:25-26

³ Matthew 22:31-32

⁴ Luke 20:38

c. Fear of separation from those we love: The promise in Scripture is of fellowship with those who have gone before. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”⁵

The Biblical expectation is of an existence where there will be fellowship of God’s people. Hebrews 12 calls it the Heavenly Jerusalem. Revelation sees this heavenly dwelling descending to the new earth when we have resurrection bodies.

d. The Fear of the Unknown: The wonderful answer to this is that Jesus has already died and been raised to life again. He has experienced death and he is for us. He calls himself the Resurrection and the Life. He is our shepherd. He cares for us and will take us through into eternal life.

Elizabeth Eliot, the former missionary to South America told of an occasion in the jungles of South America, when she and her Indian guide were travelling along a primitive path. Suddenly, they came upon a deep ravine. The only way across was a fallen tree trunk. Her guide nimbly skipped across the tree trunk but Elizabeth was terrified of falling. Her guide came back, held out his hand and grasped her and led her across safely.⁶ She was given confidence to proceed by his obvious mastery of the situation.

Perhaps a comparison with the unborn child is useful. To the unborn, the outside world is unknown and mysterious. She can see changes in the brightness of the light coming through the wall of the womb. She hears muffled sounds. But it is incomprehensible. Surely it is safer to stay here in the known world of the womb.

Then the contractions start. That must be pretty uncomfortable. I doubt the child likes it. But the process is necessary for the next stage of life to commence. So with the end of this life – there is an unknown world with only vague information available. The process of getting there may not be pleasant but just as this life is a greater experience than being in the womb, so the next life is greater than this one.

We don’t need to be afraid of death. Doreen Oborn was 105 when she died. In the week before her death, she was in hospital and she knew her kidneys were failing. She said to her grandchildren and me, “This dying is taking a long time. Maybe it’s because I’m talking to much – I’d better keep quiet.” She lay still for about 10 seconds and then she burst out laughing with her eyes twinkling. She had a strong faith in Christ and she was not afraid to go to him.

3. He lived as a human that he might help us

Because he has lived on earth, because he has been tempted, because he has suffered, he helps us in our struggles, temptations and sufferings. Two words are used here which are translated help. The first in verse 16 has the sense of “to take by the hand.” The second in verse 18, means “to come to the aid of someone.”

In living this life among us, in dying that death for us, Jesus has come to our aid. He knows exactly what it is like to struggle with temptation. He knows more about suffering than any of us. None of us has known such appalling pain and degradation as he has. If you think you have experience suffering which he has not, ask him about it. I heard of someone agonising over her rebellious children who said to Jesus, “Well you didn’t have children, you can’t know what it is like.” But she waited on God and a scripture come to mind,

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”⁷

She understood that God knows what it is to have children reject him.

⁵ 1 Thess 4:13-14

⁶ Quoted from “The NIV Commentary – Hebrews”, George Guthrie, 1998, p121

⁷ Matthew 23:37

Be very sure that Jesus does understand your heartaches, your physical and emotional pains. He prays for us continually, making intercession before the throne of the Father. He has come to our aid. He came to take our hand. He still comes to you and to me to take our hands and hold us as we go through trials.

Will you put your hand in his? Will you hold on tight when you are afraid? Will you let him hold you up if you stumble? He won't let go of you – don't let go of him.

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