

“My eyes have seen your salvation.”

Lk 2:30

Today’s feast brings the Christmas season proper to a close. For forty days we have celebrated the Incarnation of the Son of God. We have watched as He was born in a stable; we have crept forward with the shepherds to peek in a hushed stillness at the new-born babe; we have bowed down and knelt alongside the Wise Men and done Him homage; with the crowds on the bank of the Jordan we have heard the voice of the Father declare that this is His beloved Son to whom we must listen, and seen the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove; and we have tasted the new wine – not just any wine, but the very best wine – at the wedding feast in Cana in Galilee. Today, our feasting draws to a close as Mary’s first-born Son is presented in the Temple; as the Mother of the new-born Infant comes forward to be purified; and as we, like Simeon, witness the Lord entering His holy Temple.

Throughout the Scriptures, the first-born son holds a special place in the order of things. He represents the continuation of the family’s lineage and name; he represents the future fatherhood and leadership of the family; he fulfills the hope of parents who have longed for off-spring. So it is with Christ: He represents the line and house of David; He is to become the leader of mankind in the journey from death to life and become, as St Paul says, the first-born from the dead; and He fulfills the prophecies from of old that a Saviour would be born for us. The Law of Moses commanded that the first-born son be consecrated to the Lord, in part, as a preparation for the eventual consecration of the whole of the human race in the Person of the Only Begotten Son of God. Every first-born son from amongst the Chosen People served as a prophetic model of the Messiah who was to come. Now, at last, the Christ

has been born, and on this day is consecrated according to the Law of Moses, bringing that Law to its fulfilment, and completing the time of preparation.

A woman who has given birth was deemed unclean for forty days, but this was a ritual uncleanness. There was no question of her being considered somehow dirty or unworthy of coming into contact with others socially. How could the bringing of new life into the world be considered to tarnish anyone? No, on the contrary the ritual cleansing was a bringing back down to earth, as it were, of a mother following so sacred an act. Just as the priest purifies the chalice, after it has been used at Mass to hold the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord, before it can be returned to the sacristy, so a mother was ritually purified before she returned to her more ordinary and mundane tasks. On this day, Mary, the Mother of our God, cannot possibly be said to be unclean even though the traditional title of today's feast is the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. No. She who has carried within her the Incarnate Son of God – just as the chalice has carried the Precious Blood of Christ – is ritually purified to symbolize both the sacred nature of what she has carried as well as her need to be brought back down, if you will, from such rarified heights.

Finally, we have – as the reading from Malachi prophecies – witnessed the Lord entering into His own Temple. The whole of the ritual history of God's Chosen People has been building up to this moment: the coming home, in earthly terms at least, of the Lord God of Israel. He now takes His place in person in the House of God, a place that has been filled hitherto by the Ark of the Covenant. He comes to fulfil the Law of Moses which was written on those stone tablets contained within the wooden Ark and preserved in the inner sanctum of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. 'I have not come to abolish the Law,' as He Himself went on to say, 'but to fulfil it.' And in the process, the people – represented by Simeon – that walked in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death now see the great light that is Christ Himself. The time for the fulfilling of all the Old Testament prophecies has come, and the work of our

salvation can begin in earnest. ‘O gates, lift high your heads; grow higher ancient doors.

[And] let Him enter, the king of glory!’

It is as if the Church, having commanded us to celebrate the birth of Our Saviour for forty days, now exhorts us to get to work and set about co-operating with the work of our redemption. It is not accidental that Lent follows on so soon after Candlemas, for now that our eyes have seen the salvation of our God we can see – in the dazzling brightness of such a light – just how much attention our souls now need!