

## **Reflection on the Gospel-Feast of the Presentation (Luke 2:22-40)**

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The opening verses of today's gospel reading have often been a source of confusion with the result that the focus has sometimes been on the "purification" of Mary rather than on the presentation of the child. Luke implies that both Mary and Joseph come to the temple to be purified, although purification after childbirth applied only to women and not to their husbands (Leviticus 12). Vestiges of the Jewish purification ritual survived until recently in the practice of "churching" mothers and blessing their children. While blessing new-born children and their parents is to be affirmed, any suggestion that childbirth renders women unclean has been and must always be rejected. With this aside, we might turn to the main focus of the story, namely the child who is presented to God by his Law-observant Jewish parents. There are echoes here of the story of the prophet Samuel whose parents presented him to God in the temple of Shiloh. While not foregrounded in the story, there may also be an allusion to Israel's consecration of the first-born male (Exodus 13:12).

Two prophetic figures, Simeon and Anna, play key roles in the drama that unfolds: they are among the first human characters in Luke's gospel to interpret the meaning of the birth of the child. Simeon is a "just and devout" man, guided by God's Spirit. Recognising Jesus as the anointed of God and the child's appearance in the Temple as the fulfilment of God's word to him, he takes the child Jesus in his arms and gives praise to God. For Simeon, Jesus is the salvation of God, a light for revelation to the nations and the glory of Israel. Simeon blesses both Mary and Joseph and then turns his attention to Mary. His words to her echo Ezekiel 14 which speaks of a sword of division in the land: the child will be a sign of contradiction and Mary will experience in her own life the pain of struggling to understand her son.

While Simeon is given direct prophetic speech, Anna's temple prophesying is recounted indirectly. She is the only named woman prophet in the Lukan gospel, although both Elizabeth and Mary utter prophetic words. This prophesying woman proclaims the good news of salvation in Jesus. The tense of the verb used indicates that this is not a once-off event: Anna "keeps on speaking" about this child of God to "all who await the redemption of Jerusalem." Anna, like Simeon, raises her voice in the courts of the Jerusalem temple, the centre of Israel's religious, political and economic power. The invitation here might be for us to emulate Anna's courage and persistence as we enter the halls of power and seek to move the hearts of religious and political leaders of our time to compassion and justice for the displaced of our world.