

THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD 2nd February

This feast celebrates fortieth day after the birth of Jesus when his parents take the child to the Temple to be presented to the Lord and they offered a simple sacrifice, a pair of turtle doves, the sacrifice of the poor, to redeem the child or buy him back because the law stated, 'Consecrate all first born to me, the first born from every womb among the Israelites, whether man or beast it is mine' (Exodus 13.2). We then have the beautiful account of the meetings with Simeon and the prophetess Anna both of whom speak of the child's future mission. In the reading from the prophet Malachi the first verse speaks of John the Baptist but then of 'the angel of the covenant' a designation for Yahweh and by application Jesus himself and his work of purification. The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews tells how Jesus becoming one with all mankind was able to be 'a compassionate and trustworthy high priest...able to atone for human sins.'

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Malachi. The book is probably anonymous since the title 'Malachi' means messenger and was possibly taken from 3.1. The book is composed of six passages similar in construction: God or his prophet makes a statement which is disputed by priest or people and then developed into a discourse which contains threat or promise of salvation. There are two main themes: the failure of priests and people in their duties; the scandal of mixed marriage and divorce. The prophet foretells the Day of Yahweh which will purify the priesthood, consume the wicked and secure triumph for the upright. The book was written about 450BC. The enthusiasm aroused by earlier prophets following the return from exile has waned and the community is drifting. Malachi awaits the advent of the Angel of the Covenant heralded by a mysterious messenger, John the Baptist, and in the following messianic era moral order and true religion will be restored and a perfect sacrifice offered to God by all nations.

The reading, 3.1-4, refers in the opening statement to John the Baptist, 'my messenger to prepare a way before me' but then the Lord comes to his Temple, spoken of enigmatically as 'the angel of the covenant, for whom you long, is on his way.' The prophet then speaks of the day of his coming which seems to be a day of some trepidation when 'the sons of Levi' will be purified and Judah and Jerusalem's offerings will again be acceptable. The longed for 'angel of the covenant' is for us a reference to the Messiah a role which Jesus will fulfill perfectly.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 23.7-10, is a psalm for a solemn entry into the sanctuary of the Temple and the verses, 7-10, which we read refer possibly to the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Obed-Edom's house to Jerusalem by King David. The Ark in which were carried the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, was a symbol of God's presence which makes sense of the words used in the psalm, the gates of the city should indeed be wide open to receive 'this king of glory.'

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 2.14-18, comes from the first section of the letter 'the Son is greater than the angels' and within that section words which refer to 'redemption brought by Christ, not the angels.' The writer is explaining that Jesus shared in the same human nature which we all share and thus is able by his death to overcome the power of the devil and set us free from the fear of death which results from our sin. We must realise sin and death are related because both derive from the devil whose reign is opposed to the reign of Christ. The writer continues to explain that Jesus was not descended from the angels but from Abraham and became one of us, a compassionate and trustworthy high priest able to remove people's sin and relate them to God. Christ suffered 'while being put to the test' and is consequently an encouragement to all who have to face suffering following his footsteps. This reading puts some reality on the words spoken by Simeon and Anna about the child in the gospel reading in those early days in the Temple.