

Epiphany IV (29 January 2023)

“Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.”

+In the Name...

And here we are, the last Sunday in Epiphany. Fr. Hart has milked this Christmas season for all it's worth and then some. This Thursday is the Feast of the Purification, so when you come back next Sunday, the Christmas tree in the hall as well as its accompanying creche set will be gone. Packed away for another year.

But the Church's message does not get packed away: God so loved the world that He gave His only son in the form of a baby boy in Bethlehem. But then it gets interesting: not just to the Jews who had been awaiting His arrival for eons, but for the Gentiles too. This season of Epiphanytide is meant to underscore this fact, that Christ came and then died for all people who choose to believe in Him, not just those of any particular ethnic heritage. How refreshing, especially because He came from a religion that prided itself on being God's chosen people.

Yet here we have in our Gospel lesson appointed for this morning two people that were decidedly NOT of the chosen people, or at least not anymore. We are not told what the leper was ethnically, but we can assume he was Jewish by both birth and faith, yet it did not matter. His disease, in addition to being awful physically, made him ritually unclean. So no one wanted to touch him for fear they would contract it and have the same two-pronged curse. Notice which is more important to the story. The leper does not ask to be healed but to be made clean. Such was the importance of the faith to them in everyday life, or at least the influence of the temple laws on them.

The second person we come across is a centurion. We know this man is not Jewish. Not only is he not Jewish, but he works for the enemy – those Romans who have taken over the Jewish territory and are running things according to their own whims. So the fact that he is not Jewish is problematic, but then the fact that he works for the dreaded Romans compounds the problem. This sets up an interesting situation: the centurion, by his own admission an important man among the

Romans, the occupiers, is forced to ask a lowly carpenter, a nobody among the Jews, who are occupied, for help. But the centurion loved his servant so much he was willing to throw convention aside in order to help a member of his household. (And consequently, we get a line we use for our liturgy right before we receive communion: “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof...”) But the centurion is doubly rewarded: not just in the obvious was of Jesus healing his servant, but Our Lord pays him the highest compliment, one that is sure to annoy the authorities in the temple: “When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” What all is He saying there? Well, several things: this centurion is showing more faith in his belief that Jesus can heal his servant than all the people of Israel. This evil Roman occupier who

deserves only to be despised by the Jews whom he rules, “gets it”, while those same Jews, for whom Jesus came, do not! But this centurion is not the only one, Jesus says. Many other gentiles will come from all directions and be included with the Jews in this salvation that He offers. Not only will these non-Jewish believers be included, but many Jews, the “children of the Kingdom” of whom Jesus speaks, will not be included. Hence the infamous line found throughout Holy Scripture: “there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth”!

Which brings us full circle to this Thursday, the Purification or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. As was commanded in the Law of Moses, Our Lady came to the Temple 40 days after the birth of her son Jesus. It is the last feast of the Church Year calculated based on Christmas Day. Next week we will begin the lengthy purple season, which is based by counting backward from the date of Easter. So it is the final feast of the Christmas season because it is giving thanks for the safety after the mother after the often then-dangerous delivery of a child, but also her ritual purification, in this case, from the delivery of God

Incarnate. (It is from this tradition that we get the “Churching of Women”, found in the Book of Common Prayer. We no longer have the ritual of Purification found in the Jewish law, but we give thanks for the mother safely surviving childbirth.)

But there is more to this feast of the Purification: this is where Simeon and the prophetess Anna reveal Christ as not only the Messiah, but the Savior for the gentiles as well as the Jews. (Time does not permit a thorough examination of these two people, but they are both fascinating characters in their own rite. Anna had been a widow for many years, and had dedicated her life to fasting and praying in the Temple while waiting for the Messiah!) The now-famous words are recorded for us in the Gospel according to St. Luke, “LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, * according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen * thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared * before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, * and to be the glory of thy people Israel.” You might recognize them from the canticle used at Evening Prayer, and at Compline before there was a Book of Common

Prayer. Simeon had been promised by the Holy Ghost that he would not die until he saw the Savior. So he took the baby Jesus in his arms and proclaimed, "This is the one!" albeit more poetically. Simeon is saying that he himself can die now because he got to see the promised one. But here is the important part for us and for the Christmas and Epiphany seasons: God prepared the Savior for all people, both Jews and gentiles. (Simeon must have felt a little bit like your mother: if you had only listened to her in the beginning, much heartache would have been avoided later on!)

One other liturgical note, the Church in general, but your parish church in particular, blesses candles on the Feast of the Purification because of Simeon's prophecy that Christ would be "a light to lighten the gentiles". You may have heard of another name for the feast: Candlemas.

So that is how we get from Christmas to Candlemas via Epiphany and why you have been forced to tolerate the Christmas tree in the hall long after its prime.

May we show the faith of the centurion, the prophet Simeon, and the prophetess Anna, so that when Our Lord comes again He might say about us that He has not seen so great faith in Israel or anywhere else.

+In the Name...