

CANDLEMAS 2021

Today's feast has several names - The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and Candlemas. The name Candlemas refers to the Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis) in which he describes Jesus as the glory of Israel and a light to lighten the Gentiles. The other names refer to two separate ceremonies that occurred on the 40th day after the first male child was born in a family.

Following the birth of a child, Jewish mothers were required to observe a Purification Rite because blood is spilled during childbirth. The Book of Leviticus (12:8) states that following the birth of a male or female child, the mother must offer a young lamb as a sacrifice and if the family could not afford a lamb, it must be two turtledoves or pigeons. Turtledoves were migratory birds and not always available, so Mary and Joseph offered the alternative of two pigeons. The priest would offer these to God and so make atonement for the mother, so restoring her from ritual uncleanness. St Luke describes the purification sacrifice for Mary.

The Jewish Law also states that a first born human or male animal must be consecrated to the Lord (Exodus 13:2) but the firstborn male child and the first born of unclean animals shall be redeemed and by that is meant bought back from the Lord. (Ex 13:13). The price of the redemption is specified in the Book of Numbers (18:16) as being 5 shekels to be paid into the Temple Treasury. St Luke does not mention any payment being made to redeem Jesus, so he was consecrated and belonged entirely to God.

This explains why it was appropriate for the old man Simeon to take the child Jesus in his arms and thank God for keeping his promise that Simeon would not die until he had seen God's Chosen One who would bring salvation to both Jew and Gentile alike. It also explains why Jesus could say to Mary and Joseph who found him in the Temple as a 12-year-old that he was about his Father's business.

Jesus was consecrated to God and entrusted to the care and influence of the Holy Family as he prepared himself for the ministry he had been given.

Today's feast marks the liturgical end of the Christmas season. It looks back to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and looks forward to his saving act on the Cross followed by his resurrection, ascension into glory.

Happy Candlemas