
WORD MADE FLESH

Presentation of the Lord

Suffering, Purification, Presence*

Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:10-11, 13-18, Luke 2:22-40

Suffering, purification and the journey into God's presence are the spiritual heart of today's readings. Here is our song on the human journey giving voice to our deepest desire to live in communion and the fullness of life in the presence of the Holy. Here is our song of fear calling us to attend to our suffering, our passion. We cannot help but resist its awful agony sensing that just below its surface lingers a death we wish could somehow pass from us. How, after all, can we fragile human beings be asked to open and receive it? Here is our song of the pathway of purification, so beautiful as long as we are not in the heart of its action. Yet, we know it must be trod to reach the steps of the temple of God's presence and greeted with the blessing of Simeon and Anna.

Malachi speaks to us of the agony in words that many may remember hearing in the text of Handel's Messiah. "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver...and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness."

The second reading from the epistle to the Hebrews draws us to consider the meaning of this song. "It is fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the source of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father."

"Salvation" is such a wonderful word in biblical literature. The Hebrew and Greek forms of it used in the Bible speak of the possession of space and the freedom and security that is gained when we are free of constrictions. The "saviour" or *soteria* in Greek is the one who rescues and heals, who frees us from the constrictions, the binding, of our own suffering.

But the healing of our understanding of our experience, of the bondage that removes us from a whole and sanctified life, appears to us as a kind of death. We would rather cling to our bondage than risk the freedom we do not know. That is the fear Malachi speaks of. That is the fear we know in our hearts.

The Gospel reading with its lovely hominess may strike us as a text without existential value for with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem we have forgotten the spiritual meaning of its disciplines.

The ritual of purification in the temple has an echo in Christian liturgical practice of the welcoming of mothers and babies on the porch of the church, a practice still to be found in particular liturgical churches. Jesus is brought to the temple, the place of presence, the ancient symbol of God's indwelling. The rituals of purification and sacrifice which strike so many as primitive and abstract were for Jesus and his family and for our spiritual ancestors, a drama of the human journey expressing the deepest desire of the human heart to live in presence of the Holy, the joy of God's creation. It expressed the fear born of our suffering, our passion, our resistance to the agony hidden in our hearts. It expressed the confidence of the people of God

to walk the pathway of purification, face our suffering and the death in our life and step onto the temple mount in the hope of being greeted by Simeon and Anna.

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