

Sermon: 2020/01/05 (2nd Sunday aft. Christmas) - *Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; &, Luke 2:22-38 (ALTERNATIVE - Presentation of Christ in the Temple)_BTR*

[Invite children to the front. Raw wool, a large bar of soap, and a bowl of warm water.]

Malachi was the *very* last prophet that God sent to the Israelite people in Judea. And so his is the *very* final book in the Old Testament.

After that there was silence from Heaven for hundreds and hundreds of years - a *long* period of time in which there were many wars and the "Promised Land" changed "hands" between many different foreign kings from faraway.

But don't get distracted(!), Malachi told his audience, for the Savior 'whom you seek will *suddenly* come to his temple.'

Now, there are two ways that this prediction came true:

Firstly, by Jesus being brought to the Temple, unannounced and inconspicuously, for circumcision by His parents as a baby one day, (as was just described this morning in our gospel reading).

But also it may refer to Jesus' *second* coming, when He will return to rescue His people - the Church - who Saint Paul describes as being a "Temple" for the Holy Spirit: [1 Cor. 3:16].

When *that* happens something amazing will happen, says the prophet [dunk wool in washing bowl and scrub]:

He says we are like *dirty* raw wool (because of our sins) which will, on that day, get a *thoroughly* good washing by the holiness of God's presence with us in the 'new heavens and new earth', like sheep-shearers who use fullers soap to clean greasy fleece.

Let us pray: Dear God, ...

[Dismiss children.]

Circumcision - the ritualistic removal of a baby-boy's foreskin (for religious purposes) - is an uncomfortable topic...

and not just for its recipients(!),

but in Western, (liberal) democracies *and thus* the Church in these places:

A number of countries have recently considered banning it as "child cruelty" - in

Denmark and Iceland, for example.^[n.1]

The Council of Europe, the 'continent's leading human rights organisation', passed a resolution about the matter, in fact, expressing their "worry" about the - and I quote - 'violation of the physical *integrity* of children'.^[n.2]

And here, in America, there have been numerous lawsuits by children against their parents and doctors;

and under-dog presidential hopeful, Andrew Yang, has also vocalised his opposition to it.^[n.3]

The practice is, then, without-a-doubt, a controversy in this (modern) day and age.

Indeed, given the part of the body it concerns you're probably squirming and feeling embarrassed just hearing me speak about it.

"Must you?," you're thinking.

But Jesus' circumcision - or "presentation in the Temple," as the bulletin insert *euphemistically* bills it - is a *feast* day!

A "high holy day," as the Catholics would put it.

A reason for celebration and jollity - a continuation of that appropriate to Christmas.

So, why?

Why this focus?

Of what consequence is it that Mary and Joseph performed on their son - *the* Son; *God's* son - an act that some of its detractors today - mostly secularists - would call "barbaric"?

And why should we care?

After all, it is something - a relic - of the *Old* Covenant, and we are Christians, no? People of the *New* Testament.

We initiate our youngest members into the Lord's family - both genders - by a much less bloody means - that is, by the (purifying) water of baptism.

Well, the significance of Christ's circumcision lies in the fact that His *ultimate* purpose for leaving His "throne" in Heaven to come to the earth, was to die for our sins; *but* to be acceptable as a holy sacrifice required His obedience to the Law as described in *Leviticus* and the like - *all* of it.

Jesus' life, you see, before the Cross, isn't just a footnote or a "prelude."

It isn't just a curiosity from which we might derive some ethics or inspiration.

Jesus' pre-Good-Friday existence in Galilee, Samaria and Judea was *essential* for *establishing* His credentials as the true Mediator who could stand in our place to absorb the divine displeasure, which was directed at humanity:

It's like the caterpillar in its chrysalis; it's cocoon.

That's *not* time wasted!

The pupa; the insect isn't static and unchanging inside of there until the final

moment when it emerges as a butterfly.

The transformation - from one to the other - is gradual and lengthy.

It happens bit by bit; *thousands* of chemical reactions and *millions* of individual cellular mutations, which, *together*, culminate in the aforementioned dramatic climax.

Jesus' parents, therefore, bringing Him to Jerusalem and killing two pigeons in conformity with their ethnic tradition - the tradition begun by Moses millennia before - isn't, then, them just "going through the motions;" being conservative. Interesting only to anthropologists or historians.

This is the Savior of the world (being helped by His parents in) taking His first "concrete" step toward achieving His adult-life goal.

It's the "ball" starting to "roll;"

It's the first note of a beautiful symphony played by the orchestra, where all the previous music by them was just the instruments bring "warmed up."

- That preceding sound; that cacophony, which sometimes includes a couple of (recognisable) bars of "this" or "that," signals to the audience that they're in an auditorium and about to enjoy a concert, and that is certainly exciting, but the *real* thing - the thing that brought them out; the thing that they spent their money for - is to follow.

Now, the first note of the "symphony" might not be especially interesting all by itself - a humdrum "middle C" or whatever - and so, to uninformed onlookers, the sight of that poor Jewish couple from Nazareth carrying out an ancient rite that countless of other 'descendants of Abraham' had done and still do, might be easily dismissed as uninteresting, as empty routine.

But we can see, therefore, in their conformity something astonishing:

our Creator condescending to do something meticulous and painstaking from which He Himself would derive *no* benefit, but which would change humanity forever.

So, how should we respond?

As we commence this new year - 2020.

What can I do to reflect the gratitude that is in my heart for what indignities He put Himself through?

Or, perhaps you don't feel much gratitude?

Perhaps you're coming to *this* "Temple" (St. Matthew's) is just empty habit - something you do because it is inherited custom, and which is leaving you feeling...hollow.

And if that *is* you, can I urge to *throw* open your own emotional, spiritual, intellectual 'gates', and to invite 'the King of Glory' to 'come in'; to reveal Himself once more - or for the first time, perhaps - in a more profound *and powerful* way.

If you ask, He *shall* answer.

Footnotes:

1. See: Smith, Saphora (21st of September, 2018), 'Iceland's Proposed Ban on Circumcision Rattles Jews, Muslims', *NBC News*, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iceland-s-proposed-ban-circumcision-rattles-jews-muslims-n910541> (accessed January 3, 2020); and, Liphshiz, Cnaan (16th of June, 2018), 'As Denmark Considers a Ban on Circumcision, some Jews consider Leaving', *Times of Israel*, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-denmark-considers-a-ban-on-circumcision-some-jews-consider-leaving/>, (accessed January 3, 2020).
2. Gold, Tanya (11th of October, 2013), 'A Ban on Male Circumcision would be Antisemitic. How Could it Not Be?', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/11/ban-male-circumcision-antisemitic>, (accessed January 3, 2020). (My emphasis.)
3. See: Sommer, Will (19th of March, 2019), 'Andrew Yang, Upstart Democratic Presidential Candidate, Comes Out Against Circumcision', *Daily Beast*, available at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/andrew-yang-the-upstart-democratic-presidential-candidate-comes-out-against-circumcision>, (accessed January 3, 2020).