

## What Really Matters?



Luke 2:22 "When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons'."

As I have mentioned before, I entered Virginia Seminary the year after a new Prayerbook was proposed in the Episcopal Church in 1976, and was graduated a year after that new Prayerbook was formally agreed to in 1979. So, I was in the last class to study both the 1928 & the 1979 Books of Common Prayer, and we spent a lot of time noticing the subtle differences between the two,

which may explain why I am well aware that two Major Feasts of our Lord had their names changed with the new Prayerbook. The first was the former Feast of the Circumcision of Christ on January 1<sup>st</sup>, now known as the Feast of the Holy Name. The second was the feast we celebrate today, now called The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple but formerly known as the Feast of the Purification of St. Mary the Virgin, which memorialized that Mary underwent the formal Jewish cleansing rites in Jerusalem for a woman after giving birth. Both stories appear only in the Gospel of Luke, who is also very careful to establish the fact with them that everything was properly done according to the law of Moses. This was obviously something that mattered to St. Luke, but apparently not so much to the other Gospel writers, who do not mention the events or even allude to them. So, their inclusion in Luke's Gospel may tell us more about what was important to St. Luke than what was important to Jesus, or to his disciples.

Indeed, we used to have a service in the old Prayerbooks that was descended from those Jewish rites of purification of a woman after childbirth, commonly known as the Churching of Women. That Service in the new Prayerbook is now called "A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child," even though adoption would not require the purification rites. These name changes say a lot about us, about what we are culturally sensitive to, and about

how we adjust or modify traditions and practices accordingly. Thus, these changes to the Prayerbook may indeed say more about us than about the rituals themselves.

So, mindful of that, I note that Lisa and I are in the midst of a deep uncluttering of our house, throwing away a lot of old papers and other useless stuff. We are mindful of all the things that are simply gathering dust there that will be considered a nuisance someday when my children have to clean out the place after our deaths, as Lisa and I both remember doing for our own relatives. Which brings me to a certain box of miscellaneous items that I have been carrying around with me from house to house, and country to country even, for more than 50 years. The box contains an odd collection from my High School years of academic awards and certificates, debating trophies, of which there were many, and Boy Scout memorabilia. They will mean little or nothing to my children later, I imagine, but even so I am reluctant to give them up as my wife suggests. I am reluctant to simply throw them away. I know that this resistance on my part just suggests that these silly old items mean more to me than they ever will mean to others.

It is a question of what is really important to us in life. For I am well aware that the value and importance I put on some things is very different from the value and importance as perceived by others. And I need to be able to acknowledge and

accept that many of the things I value are not really important ultimately, though they are to me. Sadly, we all often tend to believe that what is important to us should be important to everyone, but alas it is not so!

Thus, St. Luke's inclusion of these two stories in his Gospel, of the circumcision of Jesus and the purification of Mary, suggest that showing Jesus and his family keeping the Law of Moses was important to Luke. But why? Perhaps because there were persistent criticisms of Jesus throughout his earthly ministry for breaking the Mosaic law! In chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel, for instance, Jesus heals a woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and the leader of the synagogue is indignant, we are told, because Jesus has "worked" on the Sabbath, which is against the law. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy," say the Ten Commandments. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, your son, or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or (even) the alien resident in your towns." The Scripture is clear, or is it, as Jesus asked the leader of that synagogue, "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

On another occasion, a Pharisee accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain from the fields because they were hungry as they walked through the countryside. "Six days you shall gather, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, you shall not gather" reads Exodus (16.26). Again, the Scripture is clear. To which on this occasion, Jesus famously responded to that Pharisee that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2.27).

On another Sabbath, Jesus was in the synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. We are told that the scribes and the Pharisees were watching Jesus here to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath or not. Apparently, Jesus had developed a reputation for violating the Sabbath, and so they were watching so that they might find an accusation against him, we are told. Even though Jesus knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to (the crowd), "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" After looking around at all of them, who apparently did not answer, Jesus said to (the man with a withered hand), "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. Immediately after this, we are told that the Pharisees went out of the synagogue and conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, about how to destroy him (Mk. 3.6).

Then there was the healing of the invalid at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Jesus simply told the invalid to take up his mat and walk, and he did. Therefore, the Jews started persecuting Jesus because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (Jn. 5:17). For this reason, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Jesus, we are told. Meanwhile the invalid also got in trouble in this healing for 'carrying his mat' on the Sabbath, which likewise was considered 'working.'

Then there was the blind beggar that Jesus healed by the Gate of Siloam, one of my favorite stories (Jn. 9:7). After his healing, the neighbors and those who had seen him before as a blind beggar began to ask afterwards, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." (And) He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight."

So, the crowd brought the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So, the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "(Jesus) put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said,

"This man (Jesus) is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such (miraculous) signs?" And they were divided among themselves. So, they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." (The man who been born blind) said, "He is a prophet." Then the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, so they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, whom you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this (we are told) because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities.

So then in the end, did Jesus break the Sabbath law or not? That is the question. And it seems to be a simple one. I have rehearsed the various stories in the Gospels, and Jesus' various responses to the charge. Were Jesus' replies satisfactory to you, or even exculpatory? So, what do you think? Because what really mattered to Jesus was apparently something very different from what really mattered to those Pharisees. And we all should be very aware that the value and importance we put on some things is very different from the value and importance as perceived by others. And we need to be able to acknowledge and accept that

many of the things we value are not really important ultimately, though they may be to us. Sadly, we all too often tend to believe that what is important to us should be important to everyone, which is perhaps the essence of Pharisaism. For this kind of thinking so is just plain and simple self-righteousness, and we should all be aware of committing that sin. AMEN.