

Sermon for the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, February 2, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Malachi 3:1–4; Psalm 84:1–6; Hebrews 2:14–18; Luke 2:22–40

In July 1985, after two years in Dallas, I moved to my second job in the church as curate for the then-new rector of Saint Luke’s Church, Baton Rouge, and later bishop of Louisiana, Charles Jenkins. In the large parish in Dallas, I was one of five priests, in Baton Rouge, one of three. More Sunday preaching came my way. That fall, I bought the first of a series of short books—collections of articles—written for clergy and adult education, by Father Raymond Brown, for many years a professor at Union Theological Seminary here in the city. He died in 1998 and was widely regarded as the leading American Roman Catholic New Testament scholar of his generation. The small paperback book was: *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories*.¹ These essays were based on one of Brown’s major works, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*.² Brown’s approach in these articles

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985).

² *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

helped make preaching on the gospel come alive for me.

Brown's *Birth of the Messiah* is a full-blown, detailed biblical commentary. The essays were written for Roman Catholics, who had waited officially until April 21, 1964, for full permission to make use of the biblical scholarship that had guided Anglicans and other Christians since the Reformation. Since then, deacons, priests, and bishops were asked publicly at their ordination, "Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?"³ Note, that the question is not whether everything one reads in the Bible is "necessary for eternal salvation," but that what is necessary is there. Today's gospel lesson might be called, to use contemporary vernacular, something of a "hot mess."

Luke the evangelist did not understand the difference in Jewish practice between the ritual purification of women after childbirth and the practice of redeeming a firstborn of humans and animals through an offering. As François Bovon, who died in 2013 and had taught

³ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 533, 542, 554.

for many years at Harvard, wrote, “the child’s presence was not necessary for the mother’s purification, and the redemption of the firstborn was not connected to the temple.”⁴ But Luke’s interest here was also Paul’s interest. Five times in this narrative Luke mentions the “law,” the law of Moses, that is, the law of the Lord.⁵ There’s also an echo of words here, as Bovon noted, which Matthew and Luke take from Mark, of giving to God the things that are God’s.⁶ The story of the presentation is not about Mary, but about the Son. Simeon is the first to recognize that he and the others are in the presence of salvation itself, the Son of God.

We do not have evidence that Luke the evangelist himself—whom Raymond Brown says wrote in the year 85, “give or take five to ten years”⁷—ever had the opportunity to read Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, the second earliest letter of Paul, now dated to have been written around the year 54.⁸ In Galatians, Paul wrote of Jesus Christ, “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to

⁴ François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 99.

⁵ Luke 2:22, 23, 24, 27, 39.

⁶ Bovon, *Ibid.*

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 226.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 468.

redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.⁹—Paul is not using “son” to mean only males. It’s rhetoric, a convention of speaking, writing, in New Testament Greek. Four short verses before these words, Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ Paul and Luke and the New Testament itself proclaims Jesus as the fulfilment of salvation history. As the angel said to Mary, “For with God nothing is impossible.”¹¹

That said, Simeon’s words to Mary, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also,) that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed,”¹² are enigmatic—hard to understand or explain. Father Brown called the meaning of these words “really obscure.”¹³ But then went on to write something I should have learned in New Testament classes in seminary, drawing our attention to the many artistic depictions of Mary with a sword and

⁹ Galatians 4:4–5.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:28.

¹¹ Translation: Bovon, 43. See also Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Corrected Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 130.

¹² Luke 2:34b–35.

¹³ Brown, 33.

writes that this practice, “violates an elementary canon of interpretation: the self-intelligibility of a writing.”¹⁴ Mary and the disciple, known from John’s gospel as the disciple Jesus loved, are not at the cross in Luke. So, what in Luke’s gospel might help us understand what Luke was trying to say? Here we can recall that Matthew and Luke share Mark’s story of Jesus being told that his mother and brothers are outside and asking for him.¹⁵ In Luke, Jesus replies, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” But only in Luke do we hear this exchange. A woman says to Jesus, “ ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you.’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’ ”¹⁶ There is Old Testament background for the idea of a sword. Brown called it “a selective sword of judgment, destroying some and sparing others.”¹⁷ He continued, “Simeon proclaims that a discriminating judgment will come upon Israel and that it will touch Mary too, as in individual Israelite.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mark 3:31–35; Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21.

¹⁶ Luke 11:27–28.

¹⁷ Brown, 34.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Let me conclude with the words of hope that Simeon speaks as he looks ahead to his own death, “[Lord], you are now dismissing your servant in peace according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”¹⁹ Again, that salvation is Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, the Son of God.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2020 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

¹⁹ Translation Bovon, 96, except I have substituted “Lord” for “Master.”