

Candlemas 2026

Luke 2.22-40

Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.

Candlemas is a real mixed bag of a Christian feast. It is among the oldest known Christian celebrations, our first evidence for its liturgy being from the fourth century. At that time, it was called the “Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary”. Here in the West, we only changed its official name in the 1960s to the Feast of the “Presentation of Christ in the Temple”. “Candlemas” is a medieval English appellation, from the practice of folks bringing their candles to church to the blessed, tenuously justified by Simeon’s talk of Christ as the light of the world. I do like a bit of folk religion—the only reason we don’t do this here is that I forget to announce it in advance for people to bring candles.

But going back to the original title—the Purification—we can detect yet another tradition associated with this occasion. The gospel of Luke does clearly say that the Holy Family arrived for a purification rite: though, notably, he says, “*their*

purification”, taking the focus away from the Virgin Mary alone. But this is followed up by something else, a reference to firstborn males being dedicated to the Lord.

It is true that, in ancient Levitical law, women were considered ritually unclean after childbirth. This is found in Leviticus 12, which tells us that “If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean”. The specific reference to a *male* child implies a distinction between male and female: and indeed “If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation”. The gender politics of ancient Israel leaves much to be desired; but our descendants might well say the same about our own time, what with various inequalities still in place.

In any case, according to Levitical laws, after the period of uncleanness comes a period of “blood purification”. This is an additional 33 days for a male child and 66 for a female. Then—forty days after childbirth—should the family bring a purification offering to the priest: a yearling lamb and a pigeon or turtledove. A proviso is made for those who cannot afford a sheep: two birds are brought instead, which is what the Holy Family seems to have brought, which

tells us something about their own socioeconomic location.

But none of this has anything to do with the consecration of the firstborn. For that, we have to turn to the Books of Exodus and Numbers. Here, Moses reminds the people about God's final plague, the sacrificing of the firstborns of Egypt; and he says that for this reason, the firstborns of Israel too belong to God, both human and animal. In the cases of some animals, they must be sacrificed: their blood dashed against the altar and their fat burnt. In the cases of others, they are to be redeemed: a donkey with a sheep, for example—and if not, then the donkey's neck is to be broken. Where this is mentioned, the text is conspicuously silent on the redemption price for a firstborn *human* child. Five shekels of silver is mentioned elsewhere, but not for humans specifically: this is what later rabbis landed on, which is currently worth just north of £100. Seems low.

In any case, these are two distinct things, the purification sacrifice for a woman after childbirth and the redemption of a firstborn child. Could be a bit of sloppiness on Luke's part, mixing together two different rituals. There is certainly no historical evidence that the two were ever observed together. Furthermore, it's not clear why Jesus is there at all: the

redemption of a firstborn child does not require his presentation to the Temple. Even if the Holy Family wanted a two-for-one deal, they didn't all have to be there.

Some scholars do think that Luke just got it wrong. Others think that there's something more interesting happening here. I'm not inclined to let Luke off the hook so easily, but I'm also a big believer in inadvertent truth-telling. We see this in John's gospel a lot: people there are constantly accidentally saying profoundly true things. Luke's error here is perhaps of the same ilk.

The clue is that no redemption price is brought for Jesus, not a one silver shekel—there is, at least, not one mentioned, and it is certainly possible that one was nevertheless paid. All the same, let's take the narrative at face value, and see where that takes us. We still have two biblical injunctions: first, for the mother to be purified and second, for the firstborn to be consecrated to the Lord, or redeemed with silver. The purification sacrifice is indeed made; but the redemption price is not met, and in its place, the child is brought to the Temple, the site of sacrifice itself.

The narrative implication seems clear: this child will not be redeemed, his life will not be valued in currency, and no exchange will be made for him. He is

indeed dedicated, consecrated, set aside for the Lord's purposes: a sacrifice that has its roots in the emancipation of God's people into freedom in the Promised Land. And there will, as we know, be another occasion during which this child's life will be traded for silver: not five pieces, but thirty, not to spare him but to have him killed—as it happens, the amount for compensation for a dead slave in the Book of Exodus.

And what this does for us is that it abolishes all finite mechanisms of redemption, and with them all systems of enumeration for the value of human life. Mothers need no longer be purified; firstborn children need no longer be bought back. The consecration of this one child, holy to the Lord, is the redemption of us all. And so it is that we begin even now to look towards that time of our redemption, entering as we do now into the Sundays before Lent, and then the Lenten fast itself.