



# *Candlemass*

**PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE**  
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*Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40*

There is a saying attributed to a sixteenth century Portuguese bishop: 'God writes straight with crooked lines.' There must have been something in the water, for, about the same time, thousands of miles away in northern Europe, Martin Luther said something remarkably similar: 'God rides the broken horse and cleaves the rotten wood.' At a time of great division in Christianity, the time of Renaissance and Reformation, of fervent Catholicism in Portugal and defiant Protestantism in Germany, there was unity too, unity of vision cutting right across the ideological divides, divine gifts in common, bridging theological chasms. Not that we should be surprised at this, of course, for what is true of that time is actually true of all times. The luminous truth of God transcends all our doctrinal disputes.

Today's bittersweet festival, forty days on from Christmas, looks back to Bethlehem and forward to the Cross. The Christ who is presented in the Temple, offered to God's service by Mary and Joseph, comes from obscurity and returns in obscurity. Had we been there with a digital camera, nothing unusual would have been recorded, nothing at all out of the ordinary. Two peasants carrying a forty day old baby were a dime-a-dozen in Jerusalem that day, and to say so is not just an aside, for it takes us right to the heart of the matter. Our Lord's birth and circumcision and presentation are exactly the same as those of every other Jewish boy, just as the crucifixion is one public execution among many, one more cross lost in a sea of gallows, an anonymous redemptive presence without any Hollywood special effects, without any sky show. When all is said and done, Jesus is never a celebrity surrounded by other celebrities.

If Matthew's account is anything to go by, he comes from a dodgy line of ancestors, a variegated group of men and a positively dangerous list of women. None of the great holy women of Judaism get a look-in here. There is no mention, for instance, of Sarah, or Rebekeh or Rachel or Leah. Instead we get Tamar, a Canaanite woman, outside the Jewish covenant altogether, who seduces her father-in-law Judah, and produces an illegitimate

child. Then there is Rahab, another Canaanite woman, another outsider, whose chief claim to fame is being a prostitute. The Moabite woman called Ruth is also a foreigner, a refugee who doesn't really belong. Then comes Bathsheba, a Hittite woman, another stranger who commits adultery with King David and then schemes to make sure her own child inherits the throne. Finally, of course, there is Mary, our Lord's mother, who finds herself pregnant and exposed to ridicule before her marriage to Joseph has taken place. This unlikely company introduces us to the fact that God writes straight with crooked lines, and some of these crooked lines are the broken horses of our own lives and the rotten wood of our own witness. God who does not hesitate to use schemers as well as heroes, impure as well as pure, men the world admires and women we sneer at – this God continues to work today through precisely the same sort of motley crew. Christianity isn't just for good and talented and humble and honest people who have their lives sorted. The story of Jesus Christ is also written by crooks and robbers and fools, and Christ's work in the world employs the dispirited and the disabled and the persecuted and the weak as well. Nobody is so bad, so insignificant, so talentless, so beyond the pale, so outside the circle of faith, that they are outside the story of Christ.

On this day of his Presentation, the Lord presents us as well, personally introducing us to his Father. As he is dedicated in the Temple, we too are dedicated. Tomorrow is the Diamond Jubilee of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II, and some of you may remember hearing her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday speech just three years earlier when she dedicated herself: 'I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service.' In order to serve one another after the pattern of Jesus Christ, in order to make the world a better place by our service, we need only become ourselves as God's true daughters and sons. We do not need to confess our sins and mend our ways in order to make ourselves acceptable to God, or become someone else in order for God to love us and use us. The good news of the gospel is that repentance flows from knowing ourselves loved just as we are; knowing ourselves loved and longed for in the strange detours of our lives long before we even think of doing anything about it. The good news is that conversion of heart is God touching us in love, God coming to live with us already in the tangled undergrowth of our society and relationships in order to transform them. We can share this transfiguring love with words and without words. On this Candlemass Day, looking back to Christmas Day and forward to Easter Day, rejoicing that God writes straight with crooked lines and rides the broken horse and cleaves the rotten wood, we dedicate ourselves afresh to carrying the Light wherever we go.

