

Christmas I, December 28, 2008
Holy Trinity, Buffalo, NY
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THE PRESENTATION – 2008

Ordinarily, today, December 28th would be “Holy Innocents Day” – the day when the church remembers the male children who were ordered slaughtered by King Herod. He issued this order because he feared that Jesus - being in the kingly line of David - might be a threat to his kingdom. Herod’s wanting all the males up to 2 years old killed does cause a problem for dating Jesus’ birth, because it implies that Jesus may have been born 2 years earlier than the birth stories would have us believe. Not only that, but Herod died in 4 BC so if you add these 4 years to the other 2, it’s possible that Jesus was born on about 6 BC.

But, don’t blame Jesus for coming in the wrong year – blame the monk who figured it out and got it wrong.

In fact, there are several special days of recognition following Christmas. On the 26th of December we remember the stoning of St. Stephan – the first Christian martyr. Dec. 27th is St. John the Apostle’s day. We have Holy Innocents day, and the presentation and naming of Jesus at his circumcision. Bach prepared special music for each of these days, and together they make up his Christmas Oratorio.

For some reason, however, this year it was decided to move Holy Innocents from December 28th to the 29th and put Luke’s passage on the Purification in its place. Actually, this story seems a little odd to be included in the birth narrative of Jesus, and it has provoked much speculation for many reasons. To start with, the origin of the purification rites is a little vague – and anthropologists have been working on an explanation for a long time. Still – it seems to be associated with uncleanness - so to speak.

I was listening to the Catholic TV station the other night and heard a priest say that he used to have debates about this story of the purification because it implies that Mary was human, just like everyone else. He said that he would be asked how this could be since Mary – in his tradition – was born without sin, and didn’t need any purification. I didn’t hear how he worked the argument out – as I recall I went into the kitchen and got a beer.

However, there seems to be a reason for Luke's telling us about this incident. Luke was trying to link the whole of Jesus' birth with his Hebrew heritage. Unfortunately, he didn't know all the particulars of that heritage because he got a few of the details mixed up. Still, he was anxious to make it clear that Jesus was the expected messiah, and that he had all the credentials to be that person.

He was in the line of David.

He was wise beyond his years, as we know from Luke's story about Jesus going to Jerusalem with his parents when he was twelve and impressing the scholars in the temple with his knowledge.

And then Jesus healed and continued to teach and to feed the hungry and to be crucified,

And Luke, unlike the other Gospel writers, has this Jesus forgiving those who crucify him, and he says that the repentant thief will be with him in paradise, and finally he commits his spirit into God's care.

Luke links it all up – puts the faith in the context of the people of God and their expectation that God would one day visit them in the form of the messiah.

And I think that we all want to see our faith as something that is beyond the ephemeral – that is beyond spirituality – that is beyond our buildings and our wonderful church meals and music. We want our faith to be deeply rooted, and that is what the Christmas season is about.

Now I know that the essence of the Christmas season is sometimes difficult to extract. It gets mixed up with presents and Christmas morning pancakes.

A Peanuts cartoon once depicted little Linus being asked by his sister why he was sending his greedy Christmas list to Santa. He tells her that he is not greedy – he says, “All I want is what I have coming to me! All I want is my fair share!” His sister says to him that Santa Claus doesn't owe him anything. But her brother says Santa does if he has been good – that's the agreement! And he ends with telling her that any tenth grade student of commercial law could you tell you that!

And, he is right, of course – but Christianity isn't subject to the parameters of commercial law. That is not what the season is about – even though gifts seem to be a part of the scene – don't forget the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh.

So the season does have its strange twists and turns. For instance, there is the story about a San Francisco pastor noticing on the day after Christmas that the infant Jesus was missing from the manger scene. He ran outside and saw a little boy with a red wagon and in the wagon was the infant from the manger crèche. When the pastor asked the boy where he had gotten his passenger from, the boy explained that he got him from the church. When the pastor asked why he took him, the boy explained that he had prayed before Christmas to the Lord Jesus that if he got a red wagon, he would give him a ride.

But as you know, the season isn't about getting – it's about giving. It's about God's gift – not our gifts. And isn't that what we heard on Christmas Eve, "For unto us a child is born – unto us a son is given."

And isn't that what we heard in today's gospel when Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and said: "Mine eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people – a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel!"

And so the faith for Luke - and for us – goes way back to the time when God first spoke to his people. And it stretches out to speak to all generations – even to the end of time.