

Theme: The days after Christmas The Dedication of Jesus

1 Jan.2012 Luke 2:21-40

Well, Christmas has officially finished.

The New Year has now begun. So, let's pack up the mess, throw out the wasted food and get on and have a jolly good holiday. Is that how you feel?

What about Jesus? We've celebrated his birthday BUT, what comes next? Is it just a matter of getting things back to normal and forgetting one of the most important events to ever happen in human history?

As we read the gospel of Luke, events surrounding the birth of Jesus didn't just end in a stable in Bethlehem. In vs.21 of our reading we discover that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day.

Circumcision was part of the covenantal responsibilities for every Jewish family who had a son. It dates back to the time of Abraham in Genesis chapter 17 when God commanded Abraham to circumcise all the males as a sign of God's covenant in the flesh with Abraham and his descendants.

The practice of circumcision was however nothing new. Many ancient cultures had a similar practice to give people a sense of identity or belonging, much like many young people today have defining tattoos or piercings. We also only need to look at our own aboriginal or indigenous cultures to see that a very similar practice of circumcision has existed for centuries, if not millennia, as a symbol of boys attaining to manhood.

For the Jewish people, this practice of circumcision was later codified through Moses in Leviticus 12. I find it of particular significance that, for the descendants of Abraham, God instructed that circumcision take place on the eighth day after birth. *'And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'* (Lev.12:3)

When I was younger I often wondered why it was so specifically stipulated to be on the eighth day. It was a little later that I discovered a baby's blood clotting factors are at their strongest on the eighth day, than any other day in their life. Isn't God amazing!

The reference to the circumcision of Jesus was therefore important for any Jewish person reading Luke's gospel, because it identified Jesus as a Jewish child being born into a Jewish family. This was vital for Luke to later demonstrate that Jesus was the rightful inheritor of the kingship of Israel, AND therefore the promised messiah according to prophesy.

The next fascinating piece of information is found in Luke 2:22 and concerns Jesus being taken up to Jerusalem to be presented to God. This occurred after the days of Mary's purification.

To better understand this, we can again refer to Leviticus 12. Vss.2&5 state it very clearly: *'If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days ... if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks ..'*

Following this period of blood defilement, the woman then commenced a period of purification. Again we read in vss.4&5 for a male child: *'She shall then continue in the blood of her purification thirty-three days.'*, and for a female child: *'.. she shall continue in the blood of her purification sixty-six days.'*

From this we discover that Joseph would have taken Mary and Jesus up to the temple in Jerusalem just after Jesus was 40 days old (7+33). The next question is, **Why did they have to go to the Temple?**

In Leviticus 12:6-7 we again have the answer:

'When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then he shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement for her.'

As a sign that her time of purification was at an end, Mary was required to make a sacrifice to God before she could again serve the ritual meals in the home, have intercourse with her husband, or attend any religious activities in the community.

The traditional sacrifice took the form of a first year lamb as a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove as a sin offering (Lev.12:6). If however, the families financial circumstances were not very good, then provision was made for them to simply offer two pigeons or two turtledoves (Lev.12:8). In the case of Joseph and Mary, we are told they offered the two birds as Mary's sacrifice for cleansing (Luke 2:24).

While the little family were in the Temple precincts they encountered two very special people. In vss.25-35 we read about an old man named Simeon, while in vss.36-38 Luke also mentions an old lady called Anna.

Why did Luke include both of these accounts? We can only surmise that it had something to do with the importance of two witnesses in Jewish law (Num.35:30 & Deut.17:6) before any important facts, or truths, could be truly established.

With this in mind, the testimonies of Simeon and Anna take on a very special significance in the light of who Jesus became, and the manner of his death and resurrection.

Simeon was the first. Here was a faithful man of God whose life had been dedicated to God's purposes for the nation of Israel. He had spent his life waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises concerning the coming of the messiah. Luke records Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit to come to the Temple on the day that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus.

When he saw Jesus he took him in his arms and blessed God for him. Note Simeon's words in vss.30-32: *'For my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel.'*

What parent would not marvel **and remember** this kind of statement made about their son? But this was not all. Simeon then turned to Mary and prophesied concerning Jesus in vss.34-35: *'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'*

Let there be no mistake. This was recorded by Luke following the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the time, Joseph and Mary would only have wondered at what these words meant. It was in the light of the death of Jesus on the cross that these words were remembered and fully understood.

Next came Luke's record of the meeting with Anna. She was obviously a known, and well remembered person, because Luke has recorded her pedigree. Anyone reading the gospel in the first century would have recognised the reference to this woman.

As we read in vs.36, Anna was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher and a known prophetess. Vs.37 also tells us that she was a very faithful lady who served God through a devoted prayer ministry. Praise God for women like Anna who are mighty prayer warriors for the Lord.

A seemingly unrelated, but interesting, piece of information concerns Anna's age. **She was old! How old?** Well, let's do the sums. If she was 17 when she was married; she was widowed when she was 24 (vs.36).

Vs.37 is a little unclear. Does the Greek say Anna was a widow **of** 84 years, **OR**, she remained a widow **for** 84 years? If she remained a widow for 84 years then Anna could have been as old as 108 years when she saw the Lord Jesus.

Despite her age (84 or 108), Luke records that she gave thanks to God for Jesus and prophesied about him. Unfortunately, we do not have any record of what she said.

What this record of Luke says to us today is that the record of the birth of Jesus did not stop after one day. Just as Jesus did not come into this world without much preparation and announcement, so his first months were also filled with significance and importance.

Jesus was born for a purpose into a specific cultural and religious context, and we should not ignore that. He was dedicated to God's work from his very beginning, and this was affirmed by Simeon and Anna.

What about you? I'm not asking if your parents dedicated you to God soon after you were born. I'm asking **you** if you have **dedicated yourself** to God's ongoing service in your life.

It is so easy to gloss over our lives and take our life for granted. The fatalist would say, 'I am who I am; my life is what it is, and that's that'; The Buddhist would say, 'whatever happens in life, it's Karma'; and in 1956 Doris Day sang the song 'Que Sera, Sera' (Whatever will be, will be). I find this so sad because God has given us a mind to use for Him. He has given us a body to use for Him. Life is not meant to be an aimless journey through time.

Mary and Joseph dedicated themselves to be instruments of God for His purposes.

Simeon dedicated himself to wait on God's leading. Anna dedicated herself to serve the Lord in committed prayer.

As we begin this New Year, will you dedicate yourself to serve the Lord in whatever capacity He may ask of you?

In an act of dedication, I am not suggesting we have an event of mass circumcision (OUCH!), **BUT** some of you may think it would be appropriate for you to declare your dedication to, and faith in, the Lord Jesus through believer's baptism.

Others of you, if you have already made a confession of dedication and faith in baptism, may want to re-affirm your walk with the Lord through public testimony or even personal prayer.

I am sure that **any act of dedication to the Lord's service**, whether public or private, would be of far more worth than making New Year's resolutions that are either laughed off or forgotten the day after.

To be very serious with you, the Lord has His plans and purposes not just for your life now, but also for this church in this community. For many years there has been a group of wonderful people who have given years of dedicated service for the Lord in this place. To those of us who are more recent, will you join with me in truly dedicating ourselves to our Lord's ongoing service in and through the ministry of this place?

May **He** be glorified and honoured in all we do together for **Him**.