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Prophecy of Redemption through Suffering

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Prophecy of Redemption through Suffering

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The Presentation of the Lord

February 2, 2014 Daily Readings for Cycle A:

Mal 3:1-4; Heb 2:14-18; Lk 2:22-40

PROPHECY OF REDEMPTION THROUGH SUFFERING

Lawrence E. Frizzell

This feast has the title "Candlemass" because candles are blessed in this liturgy; it was also known as "the Purification of our Lady in the Temple", according to the prescriptions of Leviticus 12:1-8. Because the loss of blood in childbirth was understood as a loss of vitality, the woman was required to offer sacrifice at the prescribed time to enter into the full life of the community again. This coincided with the command to consecrate the first-born male child to God (Ex 13:1-2), so the Church stresses that this is primarily a feast of our Lord. "The Blessed Virgin conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented him to the Father in the temple and was united with him in suffering as he died on the cross" (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church #61). Thus is the maternal vocation that was consummated on Calvary.

The prophetic books come to completion with the sharp message of Malachi (whose name means "my messenger"), who probably lived in the fifth-fourth centuries B.C. His indictment of the priests and Levites serving in the Temple concludes with a threat of divine judgment. Would that they realized the marvelous function that they exercise! The twin blights of routine and compromise mar their worship. Did they not really believe that God's judgment? St. Mark saw the task of John the Baptist in the light of this passage (Mk 1:2); St. Luke shows that the sudden coming of Jesus into the Temple was awaited eagerly by elderly men and women who looked for the consolation of Israel and the deliverance of Jerusalem (2:25, 38). These were "the poor of the Lord", people who had a mature faith that recognized God to be the unique source of all true riches. Simeon acknowledged that Jesus would fulfill the meaning of his name: "The Lord is Savior". Thus he offered the canticle that the Church repeats daily in night prayer. Because he held the Prince of peace, Simeon hoped to experience peace in and through his own death.

The Gospel records a puzzling prophecy for Mary. The joy of motherhood would be tempered by the statement that she must educate her child for a peculiar destiny. "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed..." (Lk 2:34).

What could Mary make of this? From traditions concerning the prophets, Mary and Joseph would have known that many of them were persecuted -- indeed, martyred -- for their efforts to teach God's people (see Heb 11:36-40 and the apocryphal "Lives of the Prophets"). She could not have known that, in a few years, the Roman Empire would take over the government of Judea from their client-king Archelaus. The priestly leaders in the Temple would make compromises with these foreigners in order to maintain their position. Thus would they be criticized by Jesus who, like Malachi before him, desired that worship of God be conducted with a single-hearted devotion.

Could Mary have known the cost of such a witness? Mercifully, she would not have had the horror

of a Roman crucifixion before her eyes as she and Joseph guided Jesus to maturity in fulfilling the commandments. However, she would reflect on Simeon's words as she sought the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple at Passover time. The presentation of every child in the Temple included a hope that he would serve God by keeping the Law. The relationship founded on motherhood lasts a life-time, so Simeon's prophecy prepared Mary for gradually understanding that her destiny was linked with that of Jesus -- for the joy and sorrows of his life of dedication to the heavenly Father.