

Food for Thought

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24, Luke 2:22-40

The festival of the Presentation of the Lord, also called “Candlemas,” may have begun as a celebration of the revelation of light, even rebirth from the darkness of political oppression, to liberation and Covenant with God’s realm of distributive justice-compassion. The organizers of Christian tradition were masters of the appropriation of local cultural myth and metaphor. The Christ was nearly immediately defined as “the light of the world” (John 1:1-6). Luke’s Simeon sings what became known in Catholic liturgy as the *nunc dimittis*: “Now let they servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to all Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the pre-Christian Celtic Goddess Brigid got associated with the Abbess of Kildare, and became known as St. Brigid. The date for the festival of the presentation has varied, depending on when Jesus’ birth was supposed to have occurred. Once December 25 was agreed upon (as opposed to January 6), February 2 became the day. February 2 is not just Ground Hog’s day. It is the time in the Planet’s yearly orbit around the sun, halfway between solstice and equinox (15 degrees Aquarius), when, in the northern hemisphere, the light noticeably changes from the darkness of winter to

the increasing brightness of spring. The actual cross-quarter day according to astronomers this year is tomorrow, February 3.

In northern agricultural life, this time of year brings the first births of livestock, (not to mention Punxsutawney Phil) and milk and eggs once again become available, if not plentiful. The Celtic Goddess of Wisdom, Bride, in charge of poetry, smithcraft, and healing, became the Christian saint Brigid, who was reputed to have been the wet nurse for the baby Jesus. Brigid's feast day is February 1, which conveniently appropriates the old pre-Christian festival celebrating rebirth and the increasing light (Imbolc). Milk and milk products (cheeses, butter) are on the menu for the feast. The festival mass for this day is called Candlemas. As the light returns to the world, the Christ is revealed.

This festival can be reclaimed, using the metaphors of justice-compassion from Malachi, Psalm 24, and Luke. The prophet Malachi challenges the leaders of the people to take care of the oppressed; the writer of the psalm says that those who are authorized to "ascend the hill of the Lord" and come into the temple are those "with clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false." Old Simeon says he can die in peace, now that he has seen the one who will be a

light to all the world. Anna speaks “about the child to all who were waiting for the liberation of Jerusalem.”

In *The First Christmas*¹ Borg and Crossan suggest that Luke’s purpose was to set up the birth of the Jewish Messiah as a counter to the birth of the Roman Caesar – also hailed as the “Savior, Redeemer, Son of God.” The scene in the temple in Jerusalem confirms the child Jesus as the expected one who would redeem Israel from bondage to imperial injustice and oppression.

Luke’s story is grounded in the mandate in Leviticus 12, which requires the mother to follow specific rites of purification, 40 days after giving birth. But the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary seem to overturn Luke’s references to Leviticus 12 by bringing in verses out of context from the prophet Malachi. The result is that Malachi’s messenger is assumed by Christian tradition to be John the Baptist, who is sent from God to announce the sudden coming of the Lord to his temple. That Lord (Jesus) “will purify the descendants of Levi. . . . Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord.” Why? Here a subtle, unquestioned, antisemitism seeps through. The offerings of Judah and

¹Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth* (HarperOne,2007).

Jerusalem are now pleasing to God because the people have been purified of the old, Jewish religion.

But in Malachi's own context, the sons of Levi have been purified by the Lord through a process that burns away faithlessness to God's Covenant. God's Covenant is not about belief. God's covenant is about active, distributive, justice-compassion. If we read on to verse 5, God's judgment is made clear: "I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts." Listen again, with our 21st century ears: "I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, [those who oppress] the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien [undocumented or not], and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts."

The festival of St. Brigid – Candlemas – and the Presentation of the Lord – can be reclaimed with a Eucharist of milk and honey, bread and wine because those are metaphors of the natural world, the ultimate wisdom of the created universe, in

which no being is denied the abundance assured by God's Covenant of distributive justice-compassion.