

Two Turtle Doves

Hespeler, December 31, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Seventh Day of Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 148, Galatians 4:4-7, [Luke 2:22-40](#)

The young couple joined the crowds climbing the broad staircase that led to the entrance of the temple. The woman carried in her arms a child just barely over a month old. She had carried him all 11 km from the small town of Bethlehem the day before with frequent stops for nursing and changing the swaddling clothes.

This little family had spent the night in a bare room in the city, the only shelter they could afford. As is the common experience of parents with newborns, they had had little sleep. But they had risen early, thinking perhaps that they might beat the crowds, conclude their business and escape the city before the heat of the day came on.

But, as they passed through the porch and entered into the Court of the Gentiles, they realized that they were not the only ones to have had such a thought. The place was packed. It was filled with pilgrims, gawkers and worshippers. They glanced at each other anxiously. It seemed that this was going to take a while.

The child, thankfully, didn't seem to be bothered by the noise of the crowd and the cries of the sacrificial animals. He slept contentedly in his mother's arms for now, but they shuddered to think of what might happen when he awoke.

The Sellers

After a few enquiries, they made their way to the court of the women, where they needed to go today. As they approached, they saw the large pen filled with young lambs and the smaller cages that contained pigeons and turtle doves. There were wealthy women standing by and bartering with the sellers while their nurses held their children at a distance.

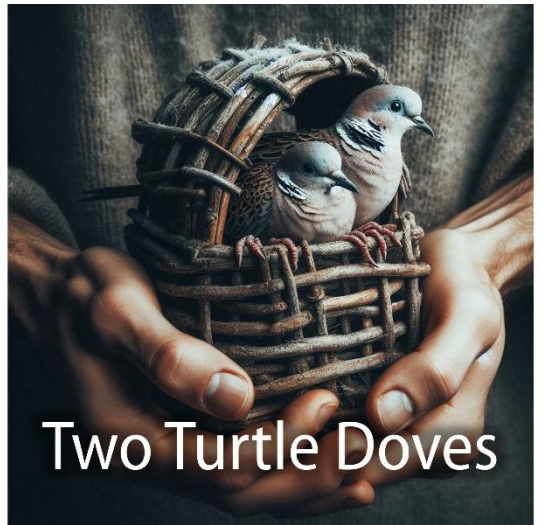
When the young man heard the prices that were being demanded for the sheep, he winced. He was sure that he could have gotten one for much cheaper from those shepherds who had dropped by shortly after the child was born. But, of course, the sellers here knew that their customers had little other choice.

He was glad that he didn't have to ask the price of a bird. He knew that that would be ridiculous as well. He had been extremely fortunate the day before and been able to trap two turtledoves as they travelled. They cooed softly in the makeshift cage he carried in his left hand as he guided the mother and her child through the entrance.

Living on the Margins

The last month had been difficult. They had been unable to find anything like secure lodging. In fact, things had been so unsettled when the child was born that they had had no place else to lay him but in a feeding trough.

Things had not gotten much better since as they moved around from place to place, taking hospitality



from strangers for the most part. On the eighth day after the boy was born, they had been very fortunate to find a skilled elder who was willing to perform the boy's circumcision and he had been admitted into the covenant of the people of Israel under the name of Yeshua.

Of course, it would have been preferable for them to return to their home in Nazareth where at least the boy's mother had family connections and support, but they had remained in the area so that they could perform the ritual for her here on the first day possible. There was some urgency to completing it, after all. Until such time as this had been done, she was effectively set apart from ordinary society. She could not eat with others, nor could she have proper relations with her husband.

This was not, to be clear, because there was anything wrong with her. It was a matter of ritual impurity, which had nothing to do with moral sin or error. It was more like she was being given a special honour. She had, after all, just done something amazing. She had brought a new life into the world. Men in particular were somewhat wary of this special power that only women had to create life. They didn't quite know what to do with it. And so, they felt a need to segregate that power for a time out of respect for it. But, even if it was an honour, it was an inconvenient one. The couple were more than ready for it to be over.

The Clerk

They stood in line for quite some time, surrounded by the sound of bleating sheep and cooing pigeons and doves. There were many women who were here waiting to perform the required sacrifice. Finally, the line began to move, and they came to stand in front of a Levitical clerk who sat behind a wooden table.

"And for what purpose do you come here today," he asked them in a bored tone as if the answer wasn't made completely obvious by the presence of a month-old boy in his mother's arms. The man was very proud to hear his wife respond in a clear and unwavering voice: "I am here to perform the purification ritual following the birth of my son."

In the tones of a bureaucrat who spends all day every day reciting the same piece of legislation, the man responded. **"When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purification offering. He shall offer it before Adonai and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female."** (Leviticus 12:6-8)

He looked up at them, taking in their poor clothing and dishevelled appearance at a glance, "So, you see, you're supposed to bring a lamb. I don't see a lamb. Where's your lamb then? They are on sale out in the outer court."

Pushing Back

The man had been expecting this. And fortunately, he was well-versed in the traditions of his people. He knew that the law had been written in such a way as to make allowances for the poor and disadvantaged, and he felt no embarrassment in invoking these traditions now.

"Come on, you know very well that the law made provisions for those who could not afford a lamb for the purification. Maybe you don't care if we have little, but God does! We are perfectly allowed to offer up these two turtle doves instead," he said holding up his little cage.

The Levite smirked. "You call those doves? They're filthy! You're sure that they're not flying rats? You didn't buy those here!"

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” the man replied sharply. “The law never says you have to buy them. I caught them myself!”

“Yes, added his wife with a smile, “I’m rather of proud of my man’s hunting skills.”

The clerk finally let out a great sigh as he reluctantly let them pass.

The Real Money

A lot of people thought that the temple made its money from the tithes and donations that people brought. But the priests and the Levites knew very well that the real money came from the sacrifices. Once most of the sacrifices were performed, some of the meat would be returned to the worshippers. Only a certain portion would be burned up – mostly the parts that were inedible or prohibited from Jewish consumption. The worshippers would take it and have a feast.

The priest wasn’t paid money. Instead, he would also claim a portion of the meat for his services – indeed, some of the best cuts of beef or mutton went to him. In a day’s service, a priest would receive much more meat than he could possibly eat with his family before it spoiled, and so it could be sold off to the elite of the city at premium prices.

That was why it was very much in the interest of all who worked in the temple to pressure people into sacrificing fine animals. What’s more, they had deals with the sellers in the temple that gave them kickbacks for every animal sold to the captive audience there. So of course, they would pressure everybody who came along to sacrifice the best animal that they could.

Temple Economics

This was something that was not only true of the temple in Jerusalem, of course. This was how it worked at most every temple of every god in the Mediterranean world. But not every ritual law made exceptions for the poor. But thanks to the strength of the Judean tradition or, some might say, thanks to the compassion and care of the God of Israel, they could not deny access to this impoverished young couple.

And so, I will say that it was with some pride for having stood up for their rights, not to mention some relief for having completed all that was fitting for a young child of the people of Israel, that the parents walked away after the completion of the sacrifice of their birds. They knew their place within a tradition that was deeply meaningful for them and that would be, they knew, meaningful for their son as well. They felt as if they had begun something very important.

They returned to the Court of the Gentiles and were very surprised, among all those who were present in the ever-swelling crowds, to be approached by a venerable old man and then a saintly widow.

More than a Mise-en-Scène

I always assumed that the first few lines of the story of the infant Jesus in the temple were just the mise-en-scène, you know, just a setting of the stage upon which the really important events will take place. The storyteller just needs to get Jesus and his parents into the temple where they can encounter the prophets, Simeon and Anna, who will tell us these very important things that we need to know about Jesus. But, as I looked closely at the opening verses of the story, I realized that it would be foolish to just skip over them.

The gospel writer is trying to teach us something important about the traditions of the people of Israel and the place of Jesus within those traditions. He is reminding us that Jesus was a part of the

ancient covenant of Abraham, which would have been marked into his flesh on the eighth day after his birth.

He is also reminding us of the rituals of purity. And I think he would like us to be mindful that these were not about treating women in Mary's situation as if they were dirty or shameful. That's not what these rituals were actually about. They were symbolic of the incredibly powerful thing that Mary had done in bringing new life into the world, especially when, in the case of Jesus, it was new life that would come as a gift to the whole world.

Mary and Joseph's Poverty

But the thing that particularly strikes me about this short preface to the story is what it says about those in poverty. Luke has already gone out of his way to underline to his readers the situation of abject poverty into which Jesus was born. Laid in a manger because there was no proper place to stay for him, visited by shepherds whose status was about as low as you could get, Luke has already made it quite clear that Jesus was anything but financially well off at his birth.

But in this story, a new dimension is added to that impoverished situation. The law was clear. A woman in Mary's situation was expected to bring a lamb for sacrifice. Yes, there was a provision in the law that she could bring two birds instead, a concession given for those who were faced with utter destitution. But many would have died before admitting such poverty before the priests.

No Apologies

But notice how Luke portrays what Mary and Joseph did. He simply says, **“and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.’”** He doesn't even mention that the expectation was that they should have sacrificed more. He suggests no sense of shame or embarrassment on their part or his. They, according to their means and who they were, were able to do what was pleasing to God.

And I find that all rather refreshing. We live in a world today where more and more people are falling through the economic cracks. And when people can no longer find affordable housing or their wages – and often enough it is full-time wages these days – are no longer enough to pay the bills, they are just written off. They no longer count.

They are a problem to be solved, a crisis for various levels of governments to fight over. If they resort to living in encampments, they might be evicted without a second thought. If their desperate situation leads to their demise because of addiction or other problems, we react with little more than a shrug.

But when we so callously dismiss a whole class of people, we not only push them deeper and deeper into crisis, we rob the entire society of all that they have to offer – and they have so much to offer us all!

God made room for an impoverished couple to fully participate in the rituals of his people, to be counted like any other Israelites before God. The benefits that came to all of us as a result are incalculable. What new strength couldn't we find for our society today, if we could let the poor have a full place and voice in our society?