

One question, in regards to Cindy and I serving and living in Ghana, that is often asked is, "Even though Ghana is a Third World country, do you see any similarity with life here in America?" Although there are many and great disparities, there are resemblances. For example, lawlessness. Crime and murders are daily occurrences. Corruption in political and legal realms take place every day, all to the disadvantage of the general population.

Quite often when discussing the corruption in Ghana, a student will say, "The law is only for those who are not in political power, the police, or the military; but, when they leave their positions the law is very hard on them." Such a consolation for injustice!

The fact is, no matter where one lives in this world, we are all subjected to the law - the law of God. Yet, there is one man who does not have to do what the Law says, Jesus. He made the Law and wrote it on the stone tablets. Being perfect, holy, and sinless there is no need to offer a sacrifice after His birth. So why did Mary and Joseph offer one? Why is Jesus being presented to the Lord as if He is under the Law? Jesus has come to put Himself under the Law-to make it apply to Him just as it applies to you. The difference is that He keeps the Law, fulfills it, and never breaks it. The consolation is that He gives His law-keeping to you.

According to the Old Testament Levitical Law, people, places, and things were distinguished in a theological sense as holy or common. Something that was holy was near to God's presence, dedicated to the service of God, and set apart for God's use. Common things, on the other hand, were not in the peculiar presence of God, dedicated to His service, nor for His use. Common things were not necessarily bad; they were simply the things of everyday life. For example, the breakfast you ate this morning is common—it's not bad, but it's not a meal set apart for God's holy use. You don't get any particular spiritual blessing from God by eating a bowl of Wheaties.

Most things in the Israelite community were common. In order to be fit, though, for service to God, a common thing would need to be sanctified—set apart and dedicated to the service of God. One person that God commanded to be set apart is the firstborn sons of Israel. Though some were dedicated to a particular service of God; like Samuel, Hannah's son as we heard in our OT Reading; the dedication of the firstborn had to do with what God did for Israel in Egypt.

You may recall that the Lord visited Egypt with ten plagues, the last of which He struck down the firstborn of humans and animals in all of Egypt. He passed over the houses of the Israelites, not because He excused them - for death also came to their houses—but it was not their firstborn sons, it was the lambs which were chosen and dedicated to die in their place.

According to the Law, women after childbirth, when the child was a boy, were unclean for seven days. They were required to stay at home an additional thirty-three days, at the birth of a girl these periods were doubled. Afterward, they were bound to present in the temple an offering of purification, namely, a lamb of a year old as a burnt-offering, and a young pigeon or turtle-dove as a sin-offering; if they were poor, two turtle-doves or young pigeons were offered; one as a burnt-offering, the other as a sin-offering. The bloodshed by these animals marks the transition from the realm of sickness and death to health and life, in conjunction with forgiveness for the mother's sins.

This is why Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple in today's Gospel—to fulfill this Law of Presentation. Having been born into the house of Israel, Jesus was incorporated into this Law, but also into the accompanying promise of redemption. For almost 1,000 years, the Israelites had been bringing their firstborn

sons to the temple to present them to God, and all of them were found in need of redemption. But when Christ is presented to God, His presentation is different. He is set apart in a different way—not as one in need of redemption, but One who will be the redemption of the world. Although His presentation begins at the temple, it is completed on the cross. There He is presented before God as the Substitute for all mankind. The blood Jesus sheds and the death He dies is the ONLY acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the world.

The presentation of the firstborn and purification of mothers have not been able to be done since the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.—even observant Jews can only follow a shadow of the Levitical Law without the temple. But there is an ever greater reason why these rituals have come to an end—because the presentation of Jesus and the purification of Mary point to the true cleansing and redemption that is available for all.

The sicknesses, the diseases, even the death of the body are only symptoms of the greater uncleanness that infects you. You didn't have to come into contact with anything filthy, or disgusting. It was a congenital defect—something you were born with. Disease is an infection or corruption of the body, but that which makes you unclean is an infection and corruption of your whole self.

Sin is that infection; rebellion is the corruption. ***We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment***, Isaiah writes (64:6a ESV). It's not something you can cleanse with soap or sanitizer. You can't wait for it to just go away after 40 or 80 days. This is an uncleanness that can *ONLY* be cleansed by blood. For, ***the blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, cleanses us from all sin*** (1 Jn 1:7b ESV). Polluted garments or filthy rags dipped in this blood are washed white as snow.

The sacrifice of Christ and the blood He shed marks the transition from sickness and death to health and life. ***For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*** (Heb 9:13-14).

Not only does the blood of Christ purify you, but it also sets you apart as holy and suitable for the presence of God. You are no common person, but you are one who has been set apart—not because of your birth order, but because a Substitute has died in your place.

You are redeemed now because of the blood of Christ—He has taken your place and given you His. In Holy Baptism the law-keeping perfection of Jesus was poured upon you with the water and His Word. Yet, God's Word also talks about redemption as something that is still yet to come. Jesus spoke of this redemption while He was teaching in the temple regarding His return as the Son of man (Lk 21:28). St. Paul also writes that we are eagerly awaiting the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23).

Christ was not only presented as the firstborn son of His mother, but three days after His blood marked the beams of the cross, He was presented as the Firstborn from the dead. This too, is your final redemption - the resurrection from the dead. Christ is the Firstborn, but on the Last Day, when you are raised from the dead, Jesus will present you to the Father as holy and blameless in His sight. Amen.