

## Views from the Pews: Candlemas

According to the Law of Moses, childbirth was regarded as a messy business which spilled blood that made the mother ceremonially unclean. Therefore, Leviticus 12:1-8 required her to undergo a period of purification, during which she

shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed [40 days for a son] ..... [then] ... 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 turtle-dove for a sin-offering. He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood.

Moreover, Exodus 13:2-10 added God's command that, in memory of God's action against the Egyptians, every first born male among the children and livestock of Israel must be set apart and consecrated to the Lord. Firstborn males from their livestock were to be sacrificed, but firstborn sons could be redeemed by offering an alternative sacrifice.

So, 40 days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in obedience to the law, went to the Temple in Jerusalem, both to enable Mary to be purified and to present him to God for redemption as her firstborn (Luke 2:22–38). Leviticus allowed for the possibility that Mary could not afford to offer a lamb, so 'she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt-offering and the other for a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.'

In the Anglican church the festival commemorating this event is called the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The earliest reference to it is from Jerusalem, where in the late 4th century the Western pilgrim Etheria attended its celebration on February 14, 40 days after Epiphany (then celebrated as Christ's birthday). It soon spread to other Eastern cities, and in 542 Justinian I decreed that its date should be moved back to February 2 (40 days after Christmas). By the middle of the 5th century the custom of observing the festival with lighted candles had been introduced, and the name Candlemas developed from this custom. In the Western church, Pope Sergius I (687–701) instituted the festival in Rome. In the East it is primarily a festival of Christ. In the West it was primarily a celebration of the Virgin Mary until the calendar reform of 1969.

*Kim King/Encyclopaedia Britannica*