

**SERMON FOR THE PRESENTATION OF
JESUS IN THE TEMPLE
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD
Rev Jordan Greatbatch**

A decade ago, Rene Lebouvier requested that his local Catholic church erase his name from the baptismal register. The church noted his demands on the margins of its records and the chapter was closed.

But the clergy abuse scandals rocking Europe, coupled with Pope Benedict XVI's conservative stances on contraception, hardened Lebouvier's views. In October 2011, a court in Normandy ruled in favor of his lawsuit to have his name permanently deleted from church records -- making the 71-year-old retiree the first Frenchman to be officially "de-baptized."

This was from a recent article in the Huffington post, which spoke of the increasing trend of many Europeans to now DE baptize

themselves. It seems for many, institutionalised religion has no place in their lives, and it is an increasing trend.

We have the opposite picture of religion in our Gospel reading today. It tells the events of Jesus' presentation in the temple, which was a requirement of Jewish law. This requirement was that every firstborn child had to be 'redeemed'. Therefore, Mary would have brought a sacrifice to the temple in order to do that. The infant Jesus did not have to be present, but Mary might have presented Jesus as a special offering to God for his service. This would have taken place in Jerusalem, in the magnificent temple built by Herod. We get a picture from the Gospels, that this would of been a place teeming with life, the fragrant smell of burning incense combined with the occasional more unpleasant smell of burning animal skin and entrails, the sound of bartering as well as prayer penetrating the eardrums, and overwhelming the senses. It was a place alive with religious life. A religious life Jesus was to become intimate with

throughout his upbringing. It was however a religious life that would produce many tensions in his ministry. He was a devout Jew in every sense of the word, and by participating in it affirmed its worth and tradition. Nevertheless, he was also very critical of it, especially those parts of religious life that were often tainted by human nature.

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Still today, there are parts of religious life that we enjoy and cherish, but also some elements that make us uncomfortable. As with the story of Rene Lebouvier who got himself DE baptised, there are many who see the institution of the church as a work of evil rather than good. There is and have been many movements throughout history that have critiqued and renewed our religious institutional life, obviously there was Jesus and his disciples, then in later history Martin Luther in the reformation, Evangelicals and Tractirians in the Anglican tradition as well as many others. This has been witness to a shift between two forms of religious expression. There is the

balancing act of non-rational and rational understandings, when the non-rational is stressed we see religion become over emotional, based in emotive conditioning, fundamentalist and tribal thinking. When the rational is emphasised, religion can become legalistic, judgemental, and purely dogma.¹ Interestingly enough the word religion originally from the Latin *religiōn* (stem of *religiō*) can mean conscientiousness, piety, (*āre*) to tie, fasten (*re- re- + ligāre*) to bind, tie; compare. It speaks of the knot that binds us together, be it our worship, or our lifestyles. It is one of those phrases that has developed in to a by-word for everything that is wrong about human notions of faith and practice.

¹ Fr Richard Rohr "*living on our one earth*" retrieved from <http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/richard-rohr/dailymeditations>

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All this negative press can leave one reeling, confused and cynical. Religion is often an uncomfortable word among us Protestants, something we would like to keep at a distance. The irony of such a belief is that Jesus himself was deeply religious, he was a religious and devout Jew, as our Gospel speaks of today in fine detail. He participated in the initiation rituals of Judaism, and we read that he was deeply involved in the life of the synagogue. We are informed in our epistle reading from the letter to the Hebrews that he “became like his brothers in sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.” Meaning, he participated in the Jewish religious life so he could be the fulfiller of that life. That idea of fulfilling is the key in our conversation on religion, for while Jesus affirmed and participated in Jewish religious life he was also critical of those parts that had been interpreted through the lens of human selfishness and pride. We see

this criticism throughout his ministry, critiquing the religious leaders who had used their power for personal gain, and made the law a burden. We, who are clergy, must place ourselves within that criticism, many of us are guilty of the same things, and it is a collective problem of all religious people. However, it is not all doom and gloom, for Jesus always offers us a religion that holds the right balance. He affirms the institution and the rituals associated with it, yet always points to the deeper meaning behind them, they are structures, which facilitate the worship and ministry of the church. This coming together of institution and ritual is seen strikingly in the combination of the prophet figure Simeon representing those who traditionally critiqued Israel’s religious life, being atypically found in the temple of Jerusalem which was the representation of the institution of Israel’s religious and national identity.

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The church today, especially the institutionalised churches of the Catholic or Orthodox tradition still have to hold that difficult tension. Our French friend Rene Lebouvier for all his negativity towards the church is right, if institutional religion becomes involved with issues of power and dogma; it is in danger of losing its real purpose: a place where God should be met through its structures of accountable leadership, liturgy, rituals and beautiful buildings. We have to be constantly alert to Jesus' affirmation of religious life and structures, but also as wise as serpents when it comes to his awareness of the pitfalls of such human systems. Like the old man Simeon, we must be patient in waiting, ready to listen, and able to approach the temple where God has promised to meet us through the reading of the scriptures, prayers and the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. My prayer is that men and women like Rene

Lebouvier, may find healing for the many wounds the institutional church has caused, and come to the Jesus Christ, who fulfils the law, redeems religion and reveals the inner thoughts of many, including us, his church, Amen.