

Presentation of Christ in the Temple 2019

The whole of the opening of Luke's Gospel is designed to take us on a journey. It is radiant yet unfamiliar because we are drawn into a divine picture of angels announcing various elements of the account, indeed of choirs of angels and people eloquently bursting into song. Yet mixed with this are scenes of everyday life; of a faithful priest going about his job, the sorrow that he and his wife feel have been unable to conceive a child, of the predicament of an unmarried pregnant girl, journeys to crowded towns and so on. Yet Luke achieves a remarkable work in leading and helping us to see the power of God at work within the everyday facets of our lives, in the very ordinariness of how we live.

We have four people and a baby, all whose lives were touched in some way by this unplanned meeting in the Temple. Out of it came a song that has been sung through the centuries, together the festival we know as Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. For us it marks the end of the Christmas season, and it opens us to themes of presentation, purification, meeting and light for the world. These are joyful and hopeful themes. But the Presentation is also the hinge when we turn from Christmas to look towards Lent, Holy Week and the Passion – the life-giving love of this child, the very Light of the World. So there is a bitter-sweetness about today; a poignancy as, like Mary, we take in the fact that the joy at this child's birth will have to embrace, too, for us, the pain of a sword piercing the soul.

The Temple would have been a busy place; crowds of people at any time of the day and night. This day when Jesus was presented in the Temple would have been no different. Crowds of people milling around, worshipping, praying, buying animals for the sacrifices, chatting with each other, catching up with friends and family.

But amidst the busy crowd was Simeon - an oasis of calm amidst the frenetic activity. We read in v.25: "Simeon was righteous and devout. He was waiting..." His whole life had been devoted to waiting - waiting for the one God would send for the consolation of Israel. He knew his Scriptures, he was obviously Godly and had faith that the Anointed One – the promised Messiah - would come. Simeon believed that this would happen before he faced death. Allowing God's call within his life, in verse 26 we read that, "it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

We can't imagine what it was that Simeon saw in the Holy Family. Mary, Joseph and the child would have looked much the same as any other family in the Temple on that day. But, in verse 27, we are simply told that, "Simeon was moved by the Spirit". He went into the Temple courts, saw the Holy Family, his eyes fixed on the baby Jesus, and Simeon knew-knew that this was the one he had been waiting for, the one Israel had been longing for.

The gentleness of this recognition and meeting seem far removed from the drama of the prophet Malachi, *'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can*

endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.

The gentleness of our Gospel account seems far removed from this raging vision, but ultimately Jesus achieves this through giving himself for each of us, shattering the old order and revealing the fulness of Resurrection life. Simeon, with the child in his arms is content, because he sees God in the face of this boy who will be Light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel.

In the same scene, we come across Anna, another wise senior citizen; 84 years old, dedicated to worship and spiritual disciplines. We are told in v.37, "She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying." What incredible faith this woman had. She too was enlightened by the Holy Spirit and recognised in Jesus as the consolation of Jerusalem. Anna doesn't want to keep the good news to herself. In v.38, "she spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel," an evangelist for the Lord.

So, in Simeon and Anna, who experience a senior moment to die for (*Ann Lewin*), we have two sides of the same coin represented. In Simeon, we have a metaphor for our finding contentment in our own salvation and the knowledge that we can die in peace because we have met our Saviour. In Anna, we have a metaphor for the need for us to share that good news of salvation with others so that they too may be drawn to the Christ-child. Simeon represents to us confidence in our personal salvation. Anna represents to us the evangelical spirit to which we are all called. So, at this Candlemas, we can rejoice in our own salvation and we commit ourselves to the task of enabling others to walk in the light of Christ.

But we remember that our rejoicing and our calling both come with a tremendous cost. As Simeon said to Mary, "*A sword will pierce your heart*". Our salvation, our message, our rejoicing has only been made possible because Jesus was prepared to undergo Passion and Death in order to lead us to Resurrection Life.

In the meantime, as we give thanks for this Festival and remember that we are called to shed the light of Christ into the dark places not only within our own lives, but in this world; the light that the darkness could not overwhelm or overcome. We are to recall our own responsibility to be with Christ and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be signs of both light and redemption for the world. That we can be if we live **in** Christ and walk faithfully with him.

As we come to Holy Communion and receive the bread and wine of his Body and Blood, let us be renewed and uplifted, strengthened and restored in him, so that we may journey faithfully in the knowledge of his love.



The Presentation of Christ in the Temple - Philippe de Champaigne 1648 (1602 - 1674)
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

Malachi 3: 1-5

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; 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.

Galatians 4:1-7

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant 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 the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.