

Candlemas 2020

What I want to do today is to bathe myself in the golden glow of Luke's account of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which creates such a fitting end to our Christmas and Epiphany celebrations and liturgies. The beauty of Luke's writing provides us with a wonderful and intimate drawing into his narratives of the Annunciations and Nativities of both Jesus and John the Baptist. BUT – before we get to that, along comes the Prophet Malachi with hair-raising imagery of fire and fuller's soap. The other reading from Hebrews is no better with its talk of death and suffering. It is almost enough to make you 'outraged of Tunbridge Wells'!

The fact is, however, that although our faith offers us hope, joy, comfort and peace, it is **not** some form of escapism. It is utterly rooted in the human experience with its many twists and turns both mentally, intellectually and spiritually. The Prophet Malachi gives us a sense of challenge in his powerful passage, one which I think resonates powerfully in our dealings in everyday life today. One of Malachi's running themes is that of divine judgement - something powerfully present from beginning to end in our scriptures and liturgies. The Nicene Creed we say as a community of God every Sunday says that Jesus '*will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.*' Whenever we gather around the altar we always confess and repent of our sins and ask for God's forgiveness.

So what **of** divine judgement? Now you know that if any of us were to say to a person who has nothing other than a vague knowledge of faith that God is the judge of all humanity, they would laugh in our faces. They might even anthropomorphise God for you and say, 'Really? An old man sat on a throne? The shackles of faith. Sad!'

Looking at it in this way they would be right, but it is a flat one-dimensional view of faith, about as far removed from the fulness of life which Jesus Christ offers us as you could imagine. I believe that we are called to look at scripture and then explore the powerful sense of where the underlying tenor of God's revelation leads us. We ourselves tend to pick out the bits which resonate, when in fact even the challenges of passages way outside our comfort zones still have something to add to our journey. Divine judgement to me is an acknowledgement that the natural world is finite and flawed when compared to the eternal grace and love of God. We need constant reminding that we are always on a life-long journey, always seeking to deepen our understanding of the journey we make with Jesus Christ. With this comes the call to share the message.

Malachi talks of the cleansing of his people like refiners' fire or fullers' soap – a refinement which leads them to reflect their journey as the People of God. Since the very earliest days, our Faith sees the messenger who begins to proclaim this message as John the Baptist. His message was uncompromising. '*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.*' (Matthew 3: 2) I was racking my brains at the mention of fullers' soap and then remembered that Mark also uses this imagery in his account of the Transfiguration when he says that: '*[Jesus] clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any fuller in the world could bleach them.*' (Mark 9:3) In repenting – turning to Jesus - we know the fulness of the life of the Kingdom, life open to all. We are called to shine as if the fuller's soap has been worked on us.

Malachi couples the sense of cleansing with the message that we are to speak out against injustice and wrong-doing, particularly to the defenceless – *'the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.'* Does the prophet mean that we are to fear God as we would some tyrant in a tin-pot dictatorship? Well, absolutely not. Godly Fear is about knowing the immensity of God's Love which should rightly leave us in awe. Fear is one of those words which we have managed to reduce to one understanding in modern parlance, when in fact in Biblical terms it usually means the acknowledgement of the indwelling of God's Love throughout and beyond our understanding. We are also called to wonder that through Jesus Christ we have the knowledge of our invitation to join in the divine dance of Trinitarian Life.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis's great Christian allegorical novel, he captures a real sense of godly fear when he portrays Mrs. Beaver explaining to the children about the lion, Aslan: "Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." The children discover the love of Aslan whilst also knowing that this love has an element of wildness beyond their understanding to it which they will never understand fully.

Lest you fear that I have gone off on rather a tangent on this Feast of the Presentation, let me try to tie up my thoughts. I absolutely believe in Divine Judgement. It is elemental to the life of humanity and of all being and part of our continual journey as followers of Jesus Christ. It is not a dangling before our eyes of the question of fire and the smell of sulphur, but a call to each one of us as part of the Body of Christ to urgently touch the world with the knowledge of the God of Love who calls us to follow faithfully. Our mission is to reveal the fulness of life Jesus offers through self-giving love. As the Body of Christ, we do this refined and purified through the waters of Baptism but with the constant reminder that we are always 'works in progress.' Our journey is one of seeking to follow Jesus ever more closely through prayer, word and sacrament. Any failures are forgiven.

We are to speak out and act in whatever way we can against injustice or wrongdoing. Whenever we do this, we are to temper everything by revealing the grace and love of Jesus Christ. Sometimes this will be of great cost to us. Simeon says to the Blessed Virgin Mary that her 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.'* Many of our sisters and brothers in Christ experience such cost even as I speak. Ultimately, at the heart of this beautiful Feast of the Presentation is our own recognition of the one who is the **true** *'light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people, Israel,'* - Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – the same yesterday, today and for ever.

A prayer by Ann Lewin:

Lord Jesus, set me on fire,
burn from me all that dims your light,
kindle an answering flame in lives around;
that darkness may be driven back into this world
transformed into the light of your love. Amen



Malachi 3:1-5

3 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. **2** 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; **3** 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. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ 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.

Hebrews 2:14-18

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Luke 2: 22-40

²² 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 ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴ 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.'

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;^[a] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.^[b] ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^[c] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon^[d] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[e] in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon^[f] 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna^[g] the daughter of Phanel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ 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.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.