

LOOKING THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

Malachi 3. 1-5
 Hebrews 2. 14-18
 Luke 2. 22-40

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

Not so many years ago, the celebration of Candlemass was seen as another one of the Blessed Virgin Mary's feasts, that is, the Purification;¹ and certainly, that is one element of the gospel story we hear today. But there is something far more important going on here, and that is why the title of the feast has changed to 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple'. Our Lady continues to reveal her vocation as the God-bearer by carrying our Lord to the Temple; and, as had happened forty days before when Jesus was born, there are unexpected encounters: first there were shepherds, then the Magi, and now the child meets the old man Simeon and the even older prophetess, Anna. The latter two had been waiting and waiting, not just for a long time; they had been waiting all their lives for this moment. And significantly in the Presentation scene, a *child* is at the heart of the Temple which is God's House, where his glory abides.

The Epistle to the Hebrews reinforces the importance of the Incarnation in which the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He had to become like us, like you and me, his brothers and sisters, in every respect: fully human, a child, dependent on his parents and subject to the Law.

¹ Two acts were required of devout Jewish parents: the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother. As a reminder of the exodus, the firstborn child was consecrated to the Lord (Ex 13. 2, 11-16). The firstborn male was to be redeemed (i.e. 'bought back') at a price of five shekels of silver (Num 18. 15-16). The other ritual prescribed by the Law was the purification of the mother. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and underwent purification for thirty-three days (the period was twice as long for a female child, see Lev 12. 1-5). During this time, she was not permitted to enter the Temple or touch any holy object. After the forty (or eighty) days, she was to offer a lamb and a pigeon or turtledove. If she could not afford a lamb, she could offer instead two turtledoves or pigeons (Lev 12. 6-8). Luke's account of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple underscores the fulfilment of all that the Law required at the birth of a child.

The significance of the Presentation scene, therefore, is the bringing of a child into the heart of Temple worship. If you think about it, it was probably not a particularly nice place to bring a baby. All that sacrifice: the blood, the smell, the noise, the burning flesh, the ritual, and the words. Have you ever thought about that? In this story in which Christ is front-of-stage, he says nothing. He can't. Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna: they are the ones who will speak for the child, because our Lord did not even have the ability to speak. This is one of the most beautiful things about the scene that we have described for us. God becomes a child; the Creator becomes dependent; the Word of God has no words to utter to the old man. As St Paul will later write to the Philippians, God 'emptied himself' into creation and took on human form.²

There are other powerful themes that run through the story of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple. We have already mentioned the significance of the self-emptying of God. Then, from the human point of view, there are a number of responses. Firstly, there is Mary, who is the God-bearer, who takes Jesus into God's house. Joseph is there, and whilst we do not know what he is saying or doing, we know that he is helping our Lady, quietly and silently. Writing to the Galatians, St Paul said we should 'bear one another's burdens' (6. 2), and that is what Joseph is doing; he helps Mary with her burden. Simeon, on the other hand, is drawn to the Temple and utters words that have been used daily in the Church's liturgy for centuries: '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.' Simeon's prophecy is a prophecy of inclusion, a prophecy of reconciliation, a prophecy of the redeeming mission and love of Christ, who will bring all people to himself.

² Cf. Ph 2. 5-8

The prophecy of Simeon foretells all that our Lord will bring to unite all people, ending once and for all the enmity and the enormity of the insult which is the separation of God from humankind. Our text from the epistle to the Hebrews explains why Jesus became like us 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’. Now we can see the significance of Christ coming to the Temple, to *his* Temple, and why it was so important to Luke.

The Feast of Candlemass is beautiful because it looks back to Christmas and the beauty of the Incarnation.³ But it also looks forward to all that will be accomplished in Holy Week. Candlemass looks back to the Incarnation and looks *forward* to the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord; it is a pivotal moment for us in the liturgical year. Jesus is brought to the Temple, to his Temple, a place where the glory of God resides. Christ is the Glory of God received into the Temple, where Simeon also utters a chilling prophecy to Mary and Joseph: ‘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.’

You see, the Temple was not only a place where the glory of God abided; it was also a place of sacrifice, of atonement for sin. The sinless one, as a vulnerable child, is brought into the midst of the Temple, the same Temple which he would use as an image of his own life broken on the cross.

And then, lest we forget her, there is Anna. Eighty-four years old. She has been waiting; waiting longer than Simeon, and waiting, waiting, waiting day by day. Can you imagine eighty-four years of waiting? The more I read this story the more I am left marvelling, because we are told that ‘at that moment she came, and began to

³ For many years and through the Middle Ages, Candlemass signalled the ending of Christmastide.

praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’ When we hear these words, we are tempted to say, ‘Oh Luke, why didn’t you write them down?’ What did Anna say? We do not know. That’s it. The story moves on.

But there is something else to think about. What are our vocations as Christians, as we read this story? Are we, like Mary, to be the God-bearer? Are we to be like Joseph, quietly, silently, bearing one another’s burdens? Are we to be like Simeon, praising God and bringing reconciliation and inclusion to a fragile and broken world and community? Or are we Anna?

I think that it is significant that Luke didn’t record her words. Why? Perhaps because her words are destined to become your words and my words; in a sense, we can put our story into Anna’s story. And we end the story of the Presentation by becoming like Anna, telling others about the redemption brought by our Lord, until the day comes when our waiting will be over.

Amen.