

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple Sermon

Luke 2:22-40

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Narratively, we appear to be in a sort of time machine. We have recently had Jesus as a baby, then as a twelve-year old in the temple, then his baptism when he was about thirty years of age and now we go back again to when he was just forty days old, as his parents perform two customary rites.

Every culture has its traditions and rituals surrounding birth. What Luke describes here are two customary Jewish rites. A month after his birth, Jesus is presented in the temple. Being the firstborn male, Mary and Joseph consecrate him to God in thanksgiving for God's protection of Israel's firstborn in Egypt. But Mary also needed to undergo purification, as a woman who had given birth was considered ritually unclean, which meant she couldn't participate in the complete life of the worshipping community. Luke tells us all this in this morning's Gospel reading in a very practical manner. He's also revealing to us a family that's devout and faithful to their God. But then the tone of the story changes.

As the family walks through the temple courtyard, they encounter two elderly people: Simeon and Anna. We don't much about them, except that they represent the expectant and faithful ones within Israel who remained loyal to the hope of a Messiah - faithful and waiting for God to act - waiting through the persecutions, disappointments and longings of the socio-political landscape of the times.

Just imagine the context... these two individuals see a small baby being carried through the courtyard. As they worshipped at the temple, it was a scene they would have encountered many times. And glancing across to see this one, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Just a small newborn wrapped up and being held by a parent. But then, something extraordinary happens. As Anna and Simeon look more carefully, they somehow know that this is God's Chosen One - the One whom they had waited and hoped for all these years. They knew that this was the child that would make sense

of all their hopes and longings. They didn't know how. They just had a strong conviction.

After they managed to compose themselves, Anna praised God and talked about what she had seen to the people about her. And as Simeon held the baby in his arms he sang a song. It was a song of absolute contentment – of hopes fulfilled, yearnings satisfied, dreams come true. His hands were tired as he held the child, but they trembled with a joy that he had never known in all his long life. He sang his song from the deepest part of his heart:

‘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.’

In this small baby, the child of a poor working-class couple, Simeon and Anna saw God at work. The most poignant feature about this story is how these two saw God at work in such a humble bundle. And that's also the hope that we share – for you and for me: to have the eyes and faith that Simeon and Anna had – to have the eyes and faith to recognise God at work in unlikely sources and contexts; in the sometimes simple and apparently insignificant things; to see God working in the world around us, and the faith to proclaim it.

What potential they saw in this small child was significant. It wasn't just for them – not merely for their people, but also for all peoples. God's salvation is now out in the open for everyone to behold, God's light, not just for the Jews, but for everyone. That is still how Christ is presented to us today too. As a parish here at St Peter's, we don't exist solely for ourselves. The Church is also there for none-members and to witness to unbelievers. We are here to compassionately reach out to others, to share with them what we ourselves have received by grace.

In Anna and Simeon, we see what it means to wait with faith and hope and expectation. Over the years, they must have prayed a multitude of prayers, hoped countless hopes, and experienced many setbacks. Now, their dream is realised. What we see is the culmination of faithful serving and waiting – trusting in God’s promises – never despairing, but rather looking forward to what God can do.

We have the ‘Annas’ and ‘Simeons’ in our midst still today – the quiet faithful ones who pray and care and look for the fulfilment of God’s promises. They remind us never to lose sight of what can potentially be. They are modern examples to those of us who are too frantic, distracted, disappointed or disillusioned. Or perhaps even lost their way.

Anna and Simeon remind us that through the challenging and difficult times, when hopes collapse, plans go awry, people we trust let us down, when we fail ourselves; God remains faithful.

These two extraordinary figures were richly rewarded for their fidelity. They savoured the sweetness of the Lord as they beheld the living Temple which is Christ. They saw the wonderful new beginning which God had long been preparing in Israel; the dawn of a new covenant was breaking. This Messiah would bring light, not only to the chosen people of Israel, but to all the nations, Jew and Gentile alike. The joy and peace of God, which had been announced at Christmas, was now confirmed by Simeon to be a gift to every human being, regardless of ethnicity, race or birth.

Looking backwards, the Christ child is the fulfilment of God’s promises. Looking forwards, he is the hope of the world, a light in the darkness. So may it be for us and for this community in which we live.

Amen.