



All Saints' Marseille

Sermon

Sunday, 2nd February 2020

Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas)

Year A: Malachi 3.1-5; Hebrews 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-40

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

I wonder if you have ever experienced a moment when something so beautiful happened that if you had only lived for that moment, it would somehow have been enough, for it showed you all the beauty, all the depth and all the significance that life holds.

Today is Candlemas, the day on which the Church recalls the presentation of Christ in the Temple. For Simeon, seeing the infant Jesus brought by his parents to be presented to God was such a moment. He took the baby in his arms and recognised him for who he was: 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people, Israel'. And that was enough for him – there was nothing more that he wanted now. A moment which revealed the significance of everything, and not just for Simeon but also for the entire world. His words are an echo from the prophet Isaiah (49.6), where it says of the figure known as the 'suffering servant' with whom Jesus is often identified: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' All peoples will be brought home to God, their creator.



The temple was the centre of everything in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. Above all, it was the place where the people of Israel had been given to understand that God had promised he would live among them. The prophet Malachi had foretold it, as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning: ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple’, ushering in a new age of justice for the poor and the stranger. Like the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus went on to describe. And when Simeon saw the young couple with their child, somehow he knew that the moment had arrived.

One thing that may seem puzzling to us is how Simeon and Anna both knew who he was. So many young children must have been brought to the temple in those days, and they had been waiting a long time. Yet when they saw Mary and Joseph with the child Jesus, they knew. They knew it through their expectant waiting, the lives of prayer they had led. Luke emphasises how attuned Simeon was to the movement of the Holy Spirit: ‘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’. And ‘guided by the Spirit’, he comes into the temple just at the right moment. As Jesus would later say in the Beatitudes, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’

There are different layers to this story, which is rich in meaning. By focusing on the temple and its traditions, Luke – writing for a largely Gentile audience – was keen to emphasise the continuity of the Christian story with Judaism. Remembering this is as important to us now as it was at the time Luke was writing his account. The failure of the Church at times to recognise its deep roots in Judaism has, tragically, resulted in a collusion with the many persecutions



suffered by the Jewish people through the centuries. We do well to recall this in the week we have been keeping Holocaust Memorial Day.

Another layer of this story concerns the role of ritual in human wellbeing. As humans we create rituals around the seasons of the year, and around the seasons of life: birth, coming of age, marrying, dying. They are ways of expressing our gratitude for the mystery of life and our reverence for the creator on whom we depend. In the scene in the temple, in accordance with their tradition, Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn to be dedicated to God, his mother welcomed back into the community after the birth, in reverence and thanksgiving for the miracle of new life. The circumcision of Jesus is in response to the covenant of Abraham, an acknowledgement that he is descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the people formed by God, from Moses, who led them out of bondage, and from David, the people awaiting a new Messiah.

Our Eucharist is one of the rituals of the church, in which we come to the Lord's table, bringing offerings in the bread and the cup, symbols of life, of what sustains us. We dedicate these gifts of God to the God who has formed us, who has led us out of bondage, we remember the Messiah who sacrificed himself for us, but who has been raised and who comes to meet us here. And so we put aside our cares, our preoccupations, as we remember that we are part of a bigger story, and that there is a God on whom we depend, who gives us life and gives it abundantly.

In declaring that the child Jesus was the light of the nations, Simeon's words gave rise to the other name for this feast: Candlemas, the day on which traditionally all the church's candles for the year were blessed. People also used to bring candles from their homes to be blessed – we must remember that it was once the



only source of light – and in the evening they would place them in their windows. As was often the case, the Christian festival drew partly on pre-Christian practice, when Candlemas was the festival of light, marking the mid-point of winter. In terms of the church's year, we are forty days from Christmas and it is not long before we will begin the forty days of Lent. So it's a turning point, in more ways than one.

A candle flame is particularly suitable as a symbol for the Christ-child presented in the temple. It is a source of light, but one that is vulnerable. One thinks it might easily be extinguished, but instead it sheds a huge amount of light around it, though only by being consumed. The vocation to be and to carry the light requires a willingness also to embrace darkness. Simeon perceived this too: thirty-three years before Jesus hung on the Cross, Simeon warns Mary of the pain which is to come, a sword that will pierce her soul. Jesus's adult life will embody the very struggle between light and darkness. And here in church, with the joy of Christmas still fresh in our minds, in the short liturgy we will use at the end of our service, the focus of our imagination will move from the crib (which we will take down after this service) to the Cross. What Simeon discerned was that although the climax of the story might involve pain, it would nonetheless be a source of light to the whole world. We will light candles to remind ourselves that we must share that light with our world, in our time, and that the world needs it as much now as it has always done.

Christ today still offers himself to be consumed, yet the darkness never overcomes the light. And we are sent to carry that light with us, to carry it out from here, however costly it may sometimes be. As we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews, 'because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help



those who are being tested'. Carrying the light is the Christian vocation. And it makes all the difference in the world.

Amen.