

St Augustine and St Mary's: Reflections and Prayers (offered this week by Ela)

Sunday 31st January: The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany. The Presentation of the Christ / Candlemas

Collect

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple,
in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts,
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.



Bible Readings: Malachi 3.1-5; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2.14-end; Luke 2.22-40

Liturgically, *The Presentation of the Christ in the Temple* (or *Candlemas*) marks the end of the Christmas and Epiphany season and points ahead to Lent and Easter. When reading Luke's rather short yet profound account in chapter 2 verses 22-40, we are presented with a quintessentially human story; a meeting of three generations, whereby the past, present and future intersect.

The old prophets, Simeon and Anna, have been waiting devoutly for many years for a sign from God – with words like this Sunday's Malachi reading in their hearts ('the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple' v.1). Now they recognise in the child Jesus the fulfilment of God's promise of salvation as 'consolation' and 'redemption'. Simeon's first proclamation, known as *Nunc Dimittis* (which is Latin for 'Now you are dismissing...' from v. 29), even speaks clearly of the 'light for revelation to the Gentiles'.

It is easy to forget the depth of faith that Simeon and Anna demonstrate here. We know that they are indeed correct in their perception; that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Saviour, and that his salvation is for the entire world and not just the Jews. Yet, we know this because we've already read the whole story ... We possess privileged information. As we emerge from Christmas and Epiphany, we remember the angels appearing to Mary and to Elizabeth, to Joseph and to the shepherds. We remember the star guiding the wise men from the East. We also know what happens next. We know about Jesus' ministry, about his miracles, his wisdom and his compassion; indeed we know about his death and resurrection. We know about the work of the apostles and about the growth and spread of Christianity all over the world. Yet, Simeon and Anna do not benefit from this kind of knowledge. What they have instead is prophetic knowledge revealed by the Holy Spirit (v. 26) and arriving after years and years of hoping, of praying ... of clinging onto faith in God.

The parents of Jesus are 'amazed by what is said' about their child (v. 33). Having experienced a miraculous and rather extraordinary pregnancy and birth, Mary and Joseph present their child to be blessed in the Temple in a rather ordinary way; because despite it all they are ordinary folk. They follow custom and the law of Moses. They can't afford a sheep, so they bring the poor person's equivalent for a sacrifice: 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons' (v. 24). I wonder about whether they thought to themselves, as many of us do (particularly after a meeting with a Headteacher from school!), 'How do we raise such a child? Are we going to be good parents?' Yet, we cannot miss Simeon's second oracle, in which he tells Mary that 'a sword will pierce [her] soul **too**' (v. 35). Whilst we the readers are already aware of Jesus' revolutionary life and violent death but remain consoled by his out-of-this-world resurrection, it would have been difficult for Mary to hear of her child's extraordinary future life and of his pain, as well as hers (that 'too' says such a lot), without even a glimpse of our

Easter joy. She too has to put her hope and trust in God.

Jesus the child is the focus of both pairs of adults here. He is the focus of prophecy; the focus of love; and, like all children who are loved, also a source of joy and anxiety for those who love them. So much is expected of this child. So much rests on this child. He may be God incarnate, but he is also a human baby at this point. Luke tells us at the end of the pericope that ‘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...’ (vv 39-40).

Jesus grew ... This is a hugely important fact, both from a theological and from a human perspective. Theologically, the writer to the Hebrews reminds us of the reason for the incarnation in this morning’s reading, namely because Jesus came to atone for all humankind. We are told, ‘Since ... the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things ... 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. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.’ In other words, only a human could atone for humanity, but that sacrifice should be sufficient for all the world and for all time, so only God could be equal to that task. Turtle doves or young pigeons would not do. Not even a sheep. It had to be an immense sacrifice: God as sacrificial lamb; thus, Jesus as the lamb of God.

Deep theological stuff. At the same time, however, we remember Mary, his mother, and the fact that with every stumble, every fall, every scraped knee ... every lash and every nail, as God suffered she suffered, **too**. Because we suffer with those whom we love.

As I write this, it’s bleak midwinter, and this morning’s news is again dire. There are floods. There are new border complications. *The Independent* claims that ‘UK COVID deaths surpass Great Plague, Aids pandemic and every terror attack and war since 1945 combined’ (27 Jan 2021). During a traditional Candlemas service candles would be blessed as representing the light of Christ. Some candles would be taken home by the congregation, to be lit during stormy weather; times of great vigil; times of unrest. As we experience such difficult times, where there is so much death and so much suffering ... we need to remember that, through it all, God suffers with us.

Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* is part of the funeral liturgy in the Church of England, and I was privileged to say it only a couple of weeks ago at my first funeral and burial, as guided by Claire. The overwhelming impression I was left with is that, as Karen reminded us last week, we need to cling on ‘to the eternal truths that all things are created and known and loved and held within the love of God beyond our understanding – yet revealed to us in Jesus’.

As we read and ponder and take the words of the Bible into our hearts, we **too** believe and hang on. As the Psalmist encourages us, we lift up our heads ... because God is always with us, and his salvation is here: in life and in death; joy and sorrow; today and for ever.

Like Simeon and Anna and like Mary, we have faith, and we have hope. We have love. We have God.

We have decided to close for public worship until it is safe to resume. Weekly reflective sheets will be sent out and there will be a zoom service at 10.30am on Sunday mornings.