



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

readings: [Malachi 3.1-5](#), [Hebrews 2.14-end](#), [Luke 2.22-40](#)

29 January 2023

Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, to give it its more formal and official title, is a festival which forms a kind of bridging point in the liturgical year. You may well be aware that our liturgical year is basically divided into three parts. To start at the end, the long period of Sundays after Trinity, or Ordinary Time as it is commonly known, is in a sense a kind of close season, when our gospel readings focus on a more or less continuous reading from one of the gospels of the public ministry of Jesus. And then the other two parts of the liturgical year comprise two cycles of festivals and holy days, one centred on Christmas, starting with Advent, going through Christmas itself and on through the season of Epiphany. The other cycle centres on Holy Week and Easter, beginning with the preparation season of Lent, and culminating in the celebration of Pentecost, 7 weeks after Easter. Candlemas is a kind of bridging point. Still actually in the Christmas cycle (2 February is itself the 40th and last day of the Christmas season), but with the sort of bitter-sweet message which begins to point us on towards Christ's passion. The bitter-sweetness of the message is that while the old man Simeon greets the infant Jesus as a light to the gentiles and the glory of Israel - the glory of the incarnation being very much a theme of the Christmas/Epiphany season - at the same time Simeon predicts the opposition which lies ahead for this child - a sword which will pierce Mary's soul - a reference to the means of redemption through the suffering and passion of our Lord.

Enough of the liturgy lesson, and the broad-brush explanation which sets the context for this festival of Candlemas. What can we say about the actual story of the Presentation of Christ itself and the characters which figure in it?

According to the Jewish tradition into which Jesus was born, there could have been dozens of little families in the Temple precinct at any one time doing what Mary and Joseph were doing—presenting their child in thanksgiving with an offering of two doves or young pigeons.

This Temple ceremony would be very simple and no doubt routine for the Temple priests, however personal and special to the individual family concerned. Mary and Joseph certainly wouldn't have expected anyone to take very much notice of them in the throng around the Temple courtyards, but, not a bit of it, two old people pick them out as if by instinct and home in on the baby. One of them, Simeon, we are told, takes the baby Jesus in his arms. What parent today wouldn't have their heart in their boots if a stranger attempted to do that? The filling in of safeguarding incident forms would follow. And strangers they were, because after this encounter we never hear anything about Simeon and Anna again.

Simeon, (we read) was righteous and devout, but more than that, and here is the interesting phrase, he was

...looking forward to the consolation of Israel.

Two things—firstly he was 'looking forward'; and secondly it was the 'consolation' of Israel he was looking for.

What does that mean in this context? The word that Luke uses here, translated as 'consolation' refers literally to someone who is 'called alongside'. It's the same word we find in John chapter 14 in reference to the Holy Spirit. There Jesus says he will send down another 'Comforter' (in the King James version) or more generally in modern translations 'Advocate' or 'Counsellor'. Not 'Comforter' in the sense of 'there, there, never mind' but, more dynamically, of someone who will come to our aid. Simeon sees in this baby the one whom God would send to 'come alongside' Israel in its suffering and oppression. Someone who

comforts, brings good news to the suffering, the poor, the oppressed, and speaks out on behalf of those who have no voice of their own. It has similar connotations to the title 'Emmanuel' which we hear at Christmas – God is with us – alongside us – God is for us.

When Mary and Joseph came into the temple with their son, both Simeon and Anna instantly knew, apparently, that this baby was the long awaited Messiah. Now how did they know that among the hundreds of little families every year doing exactly the same thing? Why did both Simeon and Anna single out this family as being different? We are not told. To the majority of people in the temple that day, there was apparently no difference at all. Only this one priest, Simeon and this one woman, Anna, recognised the one who was holy among the ordinary. How were they able to do that? Possibly because they'd both spent a lifetime waiting upon God. Their whole lives for many years had been immersed in God. So that when the moment came, they recognised it. Through their lifetime of prayer, Simeon and Anna were ready. And because they were ready, their walk-on bit-parts in the gospel story become a profound moment of prophecy — the Saviour sent by God to his people, to be the light of God to the whole world. Also with that hint of suffering to come.

Which brings us back to the first half of the phrase which I singled out,

'...looking forward to the consolation of Israel.

Looking forward. The context of the story is steeped in Jewish tradition. Jesus is born a Jew and is embedded in the customs of Jewish culture and tradition. Simeon and Anna themselves are clearly people who take the Temple with its ancient heritage very seriously. Anna, we are told, 'never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer day and night'. But unlike the conservative Jews whom Jesus frequently met later in his life, Simeon and Anna did not have their eyes firmly fixed on the past, but were looking forward with anticipation to what God would do in the days and years to come. Specifically, God revealed to them the consolation of Israel in this vulnerable little baby. A baby whose life's journey would be anything but plain sailing.

As Christians, we rightly take the heritage of our faith with utmost seriousness. The Bible and the received wisdom of two thousand years of Christian insight keeps us firmly rooted in tradition. It keeps our feet firmly on the ground, over and against the 'whatever works for you' type of spirituality which abounds today. But ours is not the type of tradition which is fossilised and keeps us looking backwards. Rather, it gives us the solid platform to look forwards to ask what God is saying to us now, about our own time and what is to come. And so, through our prayer and worship and our learning, and our own reason and experience, both individually and corporately, our aim is always to seek out what God is telling us in our own age and for the time that is still to come.

We end where we began. Taking one final backward glance to Christmas, and then 'looking forward to the consolation of Israel'. As we begin our approach to the season of Lent culminating in Good Friday - albeit that Lent is this year, because of the date of Easter, still three and a half weeks away. This is the baby who is himself to be the consolation offering for us forgiveness for the past, and hope and freedom for the future. This will not come without great cost – it cost Jesus his life and Mary terrible grief.

So, as we come to Communion this morning, we once again receive Christ, a light to all nations, who, for our consolation, died on the cross and rose again for us.

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