



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Hebrews 2.14-18

Luke 2. 22-40

Sunday is the fourth Sunday of Epiphany, but Tuesday 2nd of February is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. There is a saying about Candlemas, 'one look back to Christmas then turn towards the cross;' that is absolutely true. We are at the end of the Christmas/ Epiphany season and next Sunday we move to the Sundays before Lent. It is quite legitimate to leave Christmas decorations up for the whole of this season and remove them at Candlemas. Indeed my wooden nativity still stands in our lounge.

I have chosen to focus on Candlemas rather than the readings for this Sunday for several reasons. Firstly the presentation of Christ in the Temple is such a very important feast day for Christians as we will see as I examine the readings. Secondly, I have to be honest, I just love Candlemas and I have designed many evening services for it over the years.

Candlemas is one of the oldest Christian feast days; there are records of services to celebrate Christ's presentation in the Temple going back to the fourth century. It got its name because it came to be the tradition to hold a candlelight procession into the church prior to the service. Now we have candles in church which are blessed in the service. There is something so special about blessing the candles of the worshippers in our darkened church, to see the lights glow and flicker. No one can fail to be reminded of the words of St. John's gospel, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.' Usually the Song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis is played during this moment of quiet prayer.

The readings follow on nicely from the calling of Samuel a few weeks ago. We remember in Samuel 1. 3 it states that the lad Samuel is 'lying down in the temple of the Lord where the Ark of God was.'

The Ark of the Covenant was a gold covered chest; it contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments and according to Hebrews, Aaron's rod and a pot of manna. The Ark was

constructed according to instructions given by Moses and was always carried by the Israelites wherever they wandered. It was King David who brought it in triumph to Jerusalem.

The Ark was considered to be no less than the presence of God among the people. Here in the story of Samuel it is in the 'temple of God.' This is not the Temple at Jerusalem; David's son Solomon will build the great Temple to house it. Nothing was more sacred. To lose the Ark was to lose the very presence of God and it was unimaginable.

The unimaginable happened however. After Solomon's death civil wars followed, the kingdom was divided in two. Kings turned from God and worshiped idols as did the people. The prophets warned of impending doom. First the Assyrians conquered the land and next the Babylonians. They overran Jerusalem in BC 546 and this time destroyed the Temple; the Ark was never seen again. Zedekiah the king was taken into slavery and most of the people with him. Only a few poor people were left in the city. We can only imagine the desolation and pain felt by the people. The Temple had been destroyed and the Ark, the presence of God had gone.

When they returned from exile a second Temple was built. It was extended and beautified under Herod the Great and stood resplendent on Temple mount.

It was to this wonderful building which would have shone out in white and gold, that Joseph, Mary and the young child Jesus came forty days after his birth. His parents have obeyed the law to the letter. On the eighth day Jesus was circumcised and named. Next the requirement was that Mary was to go for purification and Jesus, as the first born male was to be presented in the Temple as sacred to God.

2.22 'When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Actually Mary should have given a lamb but they were too poor so the lesser offering was allowed. I think that is important. Jesus is Lord of all but is born in a stable and brought up in a poor family. That humility, being one with us in hardship, is so important.

So here they are, dwarfed by the splendour around them, a poor family coming to present their child to God. At least that is what it seems to any onlooker. However what is actually happening is momentous to those who have eyes to see. The narrative focuses now on Simeon.

²⁵ 'Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.'

We are told at once that he is a holy man and he is waiting for God's Messiah. He is special too because he has been told that he will live to see that day.

Here we have 'the meeting' with the old holy man. Incidentally this became an alternative name for this incident. Everyone sees a poor couple with their baby, Simeon sees the Messiah. He has the eyes of faith. He not only sees him he holds him. What must that moment have been like for him?

What must that moment have been like for the Temple? It had been destroyed, the Ark taken. Yes it had been rebuilt but the presence of God was simply not there. What's more there was no way of

getting it back. Of ourselves we do not get to God, he comes to us in grace; he comes to us in Jesus Christ who is our God and King.

There we have it; Jesus is the presence of God back once more in the Temple. That is why it is so momentous. Look at the Psalm 24 set for Candlemas,

'Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.'

That's it in a nutshell –the King of Glory has just come in, the Messiah, God incarnate, is held in the arms of the old man Simeon whose eyes see clearly exactly who he is.

It is then that Simeon utters those famous words that are our beautiful Nunc Dimittis. Yes he can 'depart in peace' now because he has seen the Messiah. But more than this this child will bring salvation to ALL people. For those like Simeon who see him for what he is and have faith to follow and live in his way, he brings salvation and the promises of God. Jesus came to us at Christmas, God incarnate, just as he came into the Temple - the presence of God restored. Simeon recognises that God's chosen people cannot keep God to themselves. He is the ruler of all creation because he created it.

'a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

The Magi, the first Gentiles, stood in wonder at the Epiphany; Simeon too knows that Christ is for all humanity.

There is a but however. Simeon sees the glory but he also sees the division, the pain, the sadness. 'Look back at Christmas and on to the cross.' That is exactly what happens. Simeon foresees that Jesus' life will cause division and strife as well as great hope and deliverance. There will be great reward for all who follow but also suffering. There will be persecution and opposition. There will be a great battle between love and hate, between evil and good. That battle will be fought by Jesus himself at Calvary but that battle will be won and Jesus, our God will rise and win salvation for us.

Simeon turns to Mary and says those poignant words, 'and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

It takes us straight to the foot of the cross and Mary who watches the agony of her son. Mary does the only thing she can for him, she loves him. For me that image will always be captured by the beautiful life-sized rood screen which stood over the chancel arch at Comberford Church and I hear the words of Jesus, John 19. 26 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.'

Having blessed Joseph and Mary the focus switches to Anna, here called a prophet. St. Luke in his gospel often focuses on women. It is interesting just to think of the women who do appear in his gospel.

Anna had seen her share of trouble, losing her husband and living as a widow for all these years. Look how specific Luke is even down to telling the reader her age. 'She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.' She is like our contemplative nuns. God and his worship is her reason for being. Her love of God is her whole life.

As soon as she enters into Jesus' presence she knows exactly who she is looking at. Not only this but like the shepherds of Bethlehem she rushes to tell whoever she meets she has seen the Messiah for whom they are waiting.

Jesus is destined to be rejected by most of the Jews but not here. Simeon and Anna have their epiphany moment. They see the face of God. They are really the first community of believers!

When the parents had completed all the law required they returned to their home in Nazareth. We are told, ⁴⁰ 'The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.'

In the next verses of Luke's gospel we see Jesus as a youth again in the Temple this time at the time of Passover. This juxtaposition is not an accident. We are told at the presentation his parents are amazed, well they are to be amazed again in this next scene when they find him in the Temple after a frantic search.

⁴⁶'After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' ⁴⁹He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

Of course he must, he is literally the Son of God. The realisation of who and what he is will be gradual to Mary but note what she says at Cana, 'Do whatever he tells you.' There is no doubt in her mind by then.

The gospel and the epistle readings invariably have a link.

If we think of Simeon's words, 'For my eyes have seen your salvation and 'A sword will pierce your own soul too,' we are not far off.

The very first line of the reading examines one of the reasons for the incarnation. If God was to truly come to human beings to experience the life of a human being he had to be human, 'flesh and blood' as we are, 'And the word became flesh and dwelled among us.' He had to be human in every aspect of our personalities except sin. In Jesus' perfect obedience to God in his life on earth he leaves us the example of behaviour.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.’

There was no other way that God could destroy death and evil but by taking on our human nature experiencing suffering and death and conquering it at Calvary. By doing so by bearing our sins he wins freedom and salvation for us. He is ‘The great high priest who has passed into the heavens.’

That is what Paul calls him in verse 17. The role of the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement and to sprinkle animal blood to expiate his own sins and the sins of the people.

Think of the Last Supper, ‘this is my body broken for you...this is my blood of the new covenant shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ Jesus the sinless one bore our sins for us in obedience on the cross. His was the last sacrifice and he won for us eternal life by defeating sin, death and evil.

I quote from Philippians again because Paul is making the same point here

⁹ ‘Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name.’

Because Jesus is obedient to death, he, the second person of the trinity, the crucified God, fulfils the plan for salvation and to use Paul’s words, ‘sits at God’s right hand.’

Jesus experienced exactly what humans experience, suffering. How could he walk with us unless he had walked that way himself? All who suffer in whatever way know Jesus understands it and that he is with them in their troubles. The suffering of humanity is symbolised in a way too by Mary, ‘and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

Jesus followed God in obedience to death on a cross. To be obedient to the way of Jesus isn’t easy and many have suffered for it as Jesus himself suffered. But beyond this there are the promises of God for all who are faithful to him and live in his way. Not talk about it, but do it.

When I first sat down to compose this Reflection there was a hymn at the back of my mind. I couldn’t pin it down but it was flitting about somewhere and I knew it linked the themes we have looked at in the readings. Finally I got it.

Mum and I had watched André Rieu’s Christmas concert in London around Christmas time. It happened a few years ago and it was poignant to see thousands of people in the crowd which of course can’t happen now. The thing which united the audience apart from their love of his music was their unmistakable joy.

He always does things on a grand scale; this hymn had three tenors, the full choir and orchestra in front of a huge panorama of Jerusalem. The hymn was ‘The Holy City’ and it is worth fetching it up on You Tube and listening to it then the illustration I use will be clear.

As I go through it you will see how it all fits with our readings. The hymn begins,

*'Last night I lay a-sleeping
There came a dream so fair,
I stood in old Jerusalem
Beside the temple there.'*

The voices he hears of children singing are echoed by an angelic chorus. 'Jerusalem! Jerusalem!

*Lift up your gates and sing,
Hosanna in the highest!
Hosanna to your King!'*

The scene suddenly changes in the hymn to Calvary

*As the shadow of a cross arose
Upon a lonely hill,*

But the last verse is one of victorious triumph at the resurrection and Christ's triumph over death, his winning of salvation and eternal life for us at the new creation where he reigns supreme.

*'And once again the scene was changed
New earth there seemed to be
I saw the holy city beside the tideless sea.
The light of God was on the streets
The gates are opened wide
And all who would might enter
And no one was denied.'*

All who choose the way of Christ and follow him to the end will have the promises of God. To see thousands of people singing the chorus was so moving. How wonderful if all could sing it in unity and peace.

*'Jerusalem! Jerusalem!
Lift up your gates and sing,
Hosanna in the highest!
Hosanna to your King!'*

Frederic Weatherly

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