

St Botolph's Church Worthing  
Presentation of the Lord Luke 2, v22-40  
Father Roger Walker

Our Gospel readings on the Sundays between Epiphany and Lent are really bouncing us around Jesus' life. Last Sunday we saw him performing his first miracle at Cana in Galilee.

Today we see him 40 days old – as the book of Leviticus instructs - being brought to the Temple for what is in our terms Mary's Churching - giving thanks for a safe delivery and being ritually cleansed and able to enter society once more. You may think this sounds very superstitious but the custom certainly persisted some 40 years ago when I was a curate in Newcastle upon Tyne. There, many grandmothers would not let their granddaughters come in to their house until they had been Churched. It was a service I conducted regularly but have rarely been asked for since returning to the south of England. But – to go back to Jesus' day – this was what every young woman had to do after childbirth.

It is interesting to note that Mary made the poor person's sacrifice of two young pigeons. If she had been wealthy it would have been a lamb – showing us that Jesus grew up in a very ordinary family. What Mary and Joseph did not expect at their simple family ceremony was Simeon and Anna's recognition that here was the one who would bring about God's salvation and would redeem Jerusalem. And what we have here is a private recognition of Jesus by Simeon - to encourage his family in all that lay before them, and to prepare them for the fact that it was not going to end in glory. For, despite being God's son, Jesus was going to be 'a sign that will be spoken against'. And for Mary herself – she was told. "A sword will pierce your own soul also." Anna's recognition, however, was a public one for she gave thanks to God and "spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem". I wonder if any of those listening remembered this thirty years in the future? This is a lovely touching story with glory and sadness mixed together. But can it say anything to us 2000 years later in a very different society?

Perhaps the thing that we have to pick up above all is the private and public nature of the events we heard about: because now, as then, this is how faith is communicated. Simeon spoke privately to Mary and Joseph. And we have many opportunities to speak privately about our faith to family, friends and neighbours. They may refuse to hear – remember, Jesus himself was to be 'a sign that will be spoken against' and on sad occasions there may be a rejection of *us* - as well as our faith. Just as a sword was to pierce Mary's soul: knowing this may make us apprehensive, but if we are afraid to speak there is no way our faith can be passed on – as God wants it to be – and there can be a very positive response as well. Just as Mary and Joseph marvelled at what Simeon said, the private sharing of our faith is a risk. But it can bring forth a very positive response for God.

So what about public sharing of our faith? That is, if you think about it, something we do every time we come to Church. People see us coming in here, our neighbours know where we are setting off for on Sunday morning. That's not really very demanding, is it - after all we don't have to say anything to anyone. But as soon as we identify ourselves publicly as Christians in this way we open our behaviour up to judgement. If we are a miserable grumpy neighbour and we are seen setting off for Church, the impression we give to those among whom we live is – quite rightly – that the way we live does not match up with the faith we profess.

There may be some ignorance of the Christian faith these days, but while people may not be able to relate the events of Jesus' life to the seasons of the Christian year they all know that Christians should be loving, joyful, kind and generous. And if we are not, the cry goes up: "hypocrite", and the cause of Christianity is damaged. Some of us, of course, are called to speak publicly about our faith – as I am doing now – or even to speak publicly while being *known* to be Christians – and what I say will be judged just as similar actions are – and of course, you don't need to be in a pulpit or on a stage to be speaking publicly. Any social gathering – large or small – comes within the scope of this – and we can be careless when speaking with friends and display some unchristian attitudes. They will be judged – they will provoke the mutter, "and he calls himself a Christian". And once more, the cause of Christianity is damaged.

We are Christians 24 hours a day and it is a demanding calling because we are God's ambassadors here on earth – "the Body of Christ" is what St Paul called us in last week's reading. In our lives we need to take heart and live out St Francis' famous teaching, "Preach the Gospel, use words if necessary"

AMEN

Father Roger Walker 31.1.16