

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or the Purification of St Mary the Virgin, commonly called Candlemas – though the actual day is next Friday. The courtyard of the Temple at Jerusalem covers a large area; larger than a football pitch. It is a very impressive and inspiring place to most people, but especially so to a young couple bringing their tiny baby there for the first time. My daughter was only 2½ years old when we went there.

Mary and Joseph were traditional Jews and they conformed to Jewish practice. So eight days after Jesus was born, he was circumcised and ‘named’. Then a month later, on the 40th day, Mary was required to attend the temple purification rite, “according to the law of Moses”; a kind of ‘churching’ service. As we heard in the Gospel reading (Luke 2.22-33), Joseph went with her to pay the customary temple sacrifice of two turtle-doves or young pigeons, whilst offering their son to the Lord God. Jewish custom acknowledged that everything we have belongs to God. Nothing can be more ours than our own child. But in the Hebrew ceremony, the parents had to make a sacrifice to God for their child. Everything we have, and this includes children, should be held in trust for God; for at any time God may call in what is his. Health, strength, skills, possessions; all should be regarded in this light.

This episode in the temple highlights some of the value of institutional religion; an aspect which even some Christians believers do not regard highly enough today. But the spiritual life is not a private affair. If it is kept so, it will grow deformed or diseased. It must be expressed in community. *Organised* religion is essential for religion. People who insist that their religion is purely private are not Christian, for Christianity is a corporate activity. Outwardly, this day in Jerusalem was an occasion like any other, with the usual groups of worshippers and sightseers scattered about the Temple courts. Priests and others were going about their daily business and this unremarkable couple with a precious bundle in their arms, were making their way to where the priest waited to perform the ceremony of purification and presentation. Just as the parish priest today might wait by the font for the baptismal party to arrive.

But that day, in the Temple was a man with a mission, who was probably a priest or rabbi. He had lived for a long time; being perhaps 80 years old. His eyes were dim with age but he could still see clearly what he *wanted* to see, and his mind was as keen as ever. He was beginning to feel his age, and was not anxious to live much longer. But God still had a purpose for him; a task for him to fulfil before he died; for he was the one chosen to perform the religious rites for God’s very own Son, Jesus. What a privilege! Therefore one can imagine the excitement in old Simeon’s heart when Mary gently handed her baby over to him. He immediately realised that this was that special moment for which he had long waited. Old Simeon took Jesus in his arms and thanked God in those lovely words now familiarly used at Evensong. Words immortalised for ever under their Latin title of ‘Nunc Dimittis’. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”. There are few scenes more moving than an old man with a baby in his arms, but this scene was not more moving than those words which issued from his lips. Imagine Simeon saying them in modern English.

“Now Lord, you can let your servant come to you in peace, as you promised! For at last I have seen with my own eyes, your saving grace which you prepared for every people on earth. A light to show the truth to the non-Jews, as well as to bring glory to your own people, Israel”.

This is what Simeon saw, and what we are asked to see: Jesus Christ the light of the whole world, entering the Jewish Temple with his parents. With a remarkable flash of prophetic vision, this old Jew realised that Christ's light, in addition to casting lustre upon the nation of Israel, was to illuminate the darkness of the heathen nations too. Jesus is the light of the whole world. Therefore we cannot keep him to ourselves; we must not monopolise him. Christianity is unashamedly a missionary faith. We are committed to spread it. We cannot rest until every inhabitant of the globe has heard of him. But we do not have to travel far to do our part personally. We can start with our neighbours at home or work. Simeon had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah; the Lord's anointed one. Now that he has seen the infant Jesus, he is more than ready to die. This attitude to death is not shared by everyone. Many people these days, even some Christians, are afraid to die. But we can have Simeon's quiet assurance in the face of death. By sharing Simeon's faith: by seeing in Jesus the salvation of God, and receiving him for ourselves. This attitude completely accords with my own personal feelings about death. So much so that I have left instructions for those two words “Nunc Dimittis” to be inscribed on any memorial stone erected for me.

There is just one last thought on this little scene from scripture. Joseph and Mary held in their arms, the most precious gift they had; their first-born son. Then they presented him to the Lord. That is the correct thing to do with *all* that is most precious to us. Only you know what your most precious possession is now. It will not be something merely material, otherwise you have got your priorities of life wrong. But it will be essentially part of you. It may be a child; it may be a cherished memory; it may be your profession. It could be a sorrow, a sadness; or it might even be an illness. But whatever it is, ‘present it to the Lord’. Ask God to take it, use it, remake it - and you with it. That will then be your “Presentation in the Temple”.

As an old hymn (CP542) says:

“O Love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in Thee
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be”.

That then is the lesson for us: to offer to God our most cherished possessions; to see what he would have us do with them. Mary and Joseph made their presentation to the Lord within the context of organised religion, in the Temple. There can be no better place to make our own presentation to the Lord, than within the context of our organised religion, in this lovely ancient parish church which has been dedicated to the Lord. So please do it - today - and may it bring peace in your heart.