

**The Presentation of Christ in the Temple  
(Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-end; Luke 2:22-40)**

Now we've got to the very end of January, Christmas seems to be quite a distant memory. It's been several weeks since we took down our Christmas decorations, and, no doubt by now, most folk must be making some inroads into paying off the debts they'd ran up through the bargains they'd acquired on Black Friday and Cyber Monday and at the new year sales. But in terms of the Church's calendar, we've only *just* come to the end of the season of Christmas and Epiphany, something marked by today's Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas). That's why our crib scene has remained in place right up to today. So, this week we'll finally be packing away the crib figures for another year, and the colour of the altar cloth will revert back to green – the colour for ordinary time – until we get to Lent.

Amidst all of this, though, we can so easily miss the significance of this event in the life of the infant

Jesus, which Luke faithfully records. In one sense, what the Holy Family were doing in the Temple in Jerusalem on this occasion was certainly nothing out of the ordinary. The child Jesus now being six weeks old, they were simply fulfilling the obligations required of them in the Old Testament Law. And so there are two ceremonies recounted here by Luke. One is the actual presentation of Jesus himself; it was a requirement of the Law that all first-born sons were to be presented before God in the Temple. And the other ceremony is the purification of Mary; according to the Levitical Law in the Old Testament, a mother was considered to be 'unclean' for seven days after giving birth, and she had to keep away from holy things for another 33 days. Then after this, she was required to come to the Temple to offer a sacrifice of a lamb and a dove or a pigeon.

And there wouldn't have been anything dramatic at all about Mary and Joseph with the infant Jesus coming into the Temple. You can imagine the scene: a very busy place of worship, crowded out with all sorts of people coming there to pray, to offer

sacrifices, people coming there on pilgrimage, people coming there to do the same things Mary and Joseph had come there to do. On one level, the Holy Family would have just been another family amongst the many folk milling around the Temple for various purposes.

Yet in the midst of this all, something quite *extraordinary* does indeed occur; and it comes in the form of their encounter with the two saintly individuals, Simeon and Anna. Because *they* have something highly significant to say about who *this* child, born of Mary, actually is, and what he was to grow up to *do*. A seemingly ordinary day in the life of the Temple, but amidst all this, two profoundly meaningful encounters which would have significance, not just for the people of Israel, but for the whole world.

Now Simeon was a prophet, and Luke emphasises here that what he says about Jesus is indeed a word coming from God. And what his thanksgiving - the familiar words of the *Nunc Dimittis* - reveals to us is

that the salvation which Jesus brings is for *all peoples* - Jesus is to be "a light for revelation to the *Gentiles*", as well as "for glory to your people *Israel*." At the same time, Simeon's warning to Mary speaks to us of the fact that although this offer of salvation in Christ is universal, this doesn't mean it will be accepted by everyone. There *will* be those who speak against this sign of God's love, and some will be shocked at the salvation which can only be achieved by way of the Cross. Many in Israel will rise or fall, according to whether they accept or reject the salvation God offers in his Son. Still today that offer of salvation in Jesus Christ is constantly being held out to people the world over. And we, too, have to make the decision as to whether we accept or reject it. And, as Simeon also prophesies, Jesus' suffering will not leave his mother Mary untouched either - "a sword will pierce [her] own soul too" - no doubt, a prophecy which Mary would have recalled when she witnessed the suffering and death of her son on the Cross.

And then there's the prophetess Anna. Luke's rather more brief in his description of what Anna says about the child – he notes that “she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” But what she actually said to her God-fearing friends about Jesus was probably similar to the words which Simeon had spoken.

In fact, in what Simeon and Anna have to say about Jesus, we see the words of the prophet Malachi in our Old Testament reading coming to fulfilment – that “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” The Jewish people believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the place where they could encounter God's presence in a special way. But now, in Jesus, God is coming to his temple in human form. What's more, the temple was where the sacrifice of animals was being made continually to atone for the sins of the people; but now, Jesus comes to offer *himself* as “a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people”, as our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews puts it. His sacrifice made once for all upon

the Cross would mean that no more temple sacrifices would be necessary; and neither would the temple itself be necessary any longer, as the Lord Jesus in himself is now, for us, the focus of God's presence.

So, what Simeon and Anna had to *say* about Jesus was highly significant indeed. And I do think that we can learn something too from Simeon and Anna *themselves*, as they hold before us a model of godly living. Simeon is described by Luke as a “righteous and devout man”, a man with a real passion for God's presence, a man with a real insight and devotion to the Lord. He was someone who was open to the promptings and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, someone who had a deep awareness that while there was breath in him, God had a purpose for his life. And then there's Anna – a woman who'd evidently been widowed at an early age and had devoted her life to serving God in her particular, unassuming way – through a ministry of fasting and prayer; a woman who clearly followed a disciplined spiritual life. In fact, her designation as a ‘prophet’

was indeed a rare and honoured title for a woman at that time. There had been *no* prophet in Israel for hundreds of years, so it's very significant that God had raised up this prophetess just at the time that the Messiah is revealed. Then, as now, the Lord bestows his gifts upon both godly men *and* godly *women* who seek to dedicate their lives to his service.

The thing is, Simeon and Anna were *not* part of the religious élite of Jerusalem at the time – it's highly unlikely they were folk who held *prominent* positions in Israel's central place of worship. Rather, they were ordinary devout, holy people – folk who walked closely with the Lord in humility. In fact, it was because they had spent so much time in God's presence, that they were able to recognise God come among them in human form in Jesus.

So, what about us? Well, whatever stage of life we're at and whatever our particular circumstances, like Simeon and Anna, the Lord has a ministry for *us* to fulfil – doing our bit, in our small yet *significant* way,

to further the Kingdom of God. We have to allow ourselves to be open to *his* calling upon *our* lives – not only within the church community, but in *every* aspect of our daily living.

And I do believe we can learn something from Simeon and Anna about what it means to walk closely with the Lord. These were folk whose lives were soaked in prayer, because it's only those who pray, who are open to the breath of God's Holy Spirit. So, in the midst of *our* daily lives, do *we*, like Simeon and Anna, have that desire to walk constantly in the presence of God, immersing ourselves in prayer, knowing the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit as we go about *our* day-to-day living?

We're all growing older – some of us might feel it more than others! And it's often said, 'older, and wiser'. Now it might *not* be the case that, as we get older, we feel we're getting any more *worldly*-wise. But, following the example of Simeon and Anna, we can certainly grow in *godly* wisdom – and that's what

*really* matters. Through setting aside proper time each day for prayer and for meditating upon the word of God, and by constantly seeking God's Holy Spirit in our lives, we can indeed grow in the wisdom and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one true Light of the World.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, light of the nations and glory of Israel; help us, we pray, to grow each day in wisdom and holiness, and guide each of us to discern your will for our lives. Amen.