

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple Sunday 31st January 2021

Malachi 3:1-5 and Luke 2:22-39

It's always a lovely moment when a child is brought into church for Baptism, and when the child is handed to the priest at the font, everyone hopes the little one won't cry and will accept this stranger holding them. I've attended quite a few Baptisms at St James' and I can't remember a time when the baby cried as Tony tipped water on their head, signed them with the cross and then walked down the aisle to show the new member of the church to the congregation – he must have a very reassuring presence. I wonder what all those babies thought as they gazed up into Tony's eyes?

When Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus to the Temple to 'present him to the Lord' they are doing what all good Jewish parents would do in giving their first-born son back to God. Just as Hannah did with Samuel after waiting so long for the gift of a son, and countless others down through time. Little did Mary and Joseph know that an elderly man had been waiting all his life for this moment. It's a beautiful picture – an old man taking a tiny baby gently in his arms, knowing he can now die in peace. The song of praise that he declaims, we repeat it in our Evensong services – the Nunc Dimitis – literally 'Now you dismiss' – acknowledging this wonderful moment. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that this indeed was the longed-for Messiah, God's salvation, the light of the world. Simeon's wait was over, his faithfulness rewarded.

I wonder, did Jesus cry when Simeon took him in his arms or did he sense a reassuring presence – someone who was full of the Holy Spirit?

The other witness to this revelation was Anna, another person advanced in years – she too had been a faithful watcher for probably nearly 70 years and now she recognised that this was God's promise, the redemption of Jerusalem and immediately began her new work of praising God and spreading the good news.

Simeon's message is not all sweetness and light – there will be suffering and darkness 'Mary's soul will be pierced' as she sees her son tortured and dying. That little baby will grow into a strong man – a healer, a preacher, certainly not meek and mild but a firebrand who will smash down the tables of the moneylenders, speak harsh truths and judgements to the rulers and priests and confront the hypocrisies and inequalities which even now continue to mar our world.

Malachi's message, probably written about 400 years before Jesus' birth, is also double-edged – the messenger will bring a promise – 'the covenant in whom you delight' - but also a warning.

The messenger in the reading from Malachi is, like John the Baptist, preparing the way – encouraging people to repent, to live as God would want in preparation for the coming of the Messiah – the one who would complete God's work in history. The people are encouraged to live lives that are honest, pure and generous, especially to the poor and marginalised. They must be refined like silver in the fire – a painful process but needed for purity. As we move from the Christmas season into Lent we

too are given the opportunity to self-reflect in preparation for Easter. Perhaps our refining won't be as drastic as fire, but it could be painful, uncomfortable, certainly not easy.

We may feel that this time of pandemic has been a time of trial, loss and pain, but perhaps it has given us the opportunity to ponder on the things and the people that really matter in our lives. Perhaps it has given us pause to think about our place and our purpose during this time. Perhaps we are here as Queen Esther in the Old Testament was in that place, 'for such a time as this'?

We light a candle in this season to remind us that Jesus is the light of the world – he is the Saviour who died for us and his message is one of hope and reconciliation no matter what the situation. So this Candlemas, even in this strange and difficult time, we can still present ourselves to God, to partner in Christ's work, with the strength of the Holy Spirit to help us.

We present ourselves to God as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple. We say in grateful thanks at the end of our Communion Service – 'We present ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God' and as Paul continues in Romans 12:1, 'this is your true and proper worship.'

The light brings us hope, but it also brings responsibility. Each of us has a role from young to old – Simeon and Anna found their true fulfilment right at the end of their lives. They prepared and waited for many years for that moment of revelation, but they were ready – they'd given their lives to God and he rewarded them with the joy of being part of the greatest story. We, too can be part of that story and experience the joy of the revelation of God's love and purpose for us, but we too must be willing to live lives worthy of our calling and be courageous and faithful in whatever we are called to do. It may be speaking out against injustice, emailing a friend with an encouragement, supporting a particular charity or being faithful in prayer, we may be a reassuring presence to someone who is afraid – there are so many ways that we can present ourselves as living sacrifices, even in this time of lockdown, even to the end of our lives.

How wonderful it would be to be able to say with Simeon, when we come to the end of our lives, 'Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.'

May the light of Christ be with us and refine us, inspire us and encourage us to serve him faithfully, in the way that he has planned for each of us, to the end of our lives.

AMEN