

Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

Sermon message of the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Church, February 2, 2014

Keynote Bible Reading: Luke 2.22 – 40

Living as we do in the Southern Hemisphere we may not appreciate the significance of candles in the church's liturgical observances as much as those in the north. Thus Christmas, Epiphany and today's observance traditionally called **Candlemas** lose some of their dramatic effect. I well remember when New Zealand adopted Daylight Saving, some of those candle services of Advent all needed to be a later start so as to achieve the darkness to light effect which is a significant motif of the season.

Thus today it is good we can observe this festival irrespective of the daylight shining in. We take time out from the Gospel focus this year on Matthew to hear from Luke. Yet actually the first part of the reading could easily be the first gospel with introducing this event 'performed 'according to the law of the Lord. It was called the **purification** referring especially to the provisions of the Hebrew Book of Leviticus that the woman giving birth was ceremonially impure for 40 days after the birth of a son. It was further believed that with the birth of the child, he is involved in it. Hence reference to 'their purification'. What is most significant is that it recognized the first-born son as 'holy to the Lord.' Thus Jesus would be dedicated to the service of God. This called for a sacrifice to be offered and here we learn of Joseph and Mary coming from a humble background. The traditional sacrifice was a lamb but there was an alternative of turtledoves and young pigeons. One commentary makes the point that turtledoves were migratory birds and not always procurable, and old pigeons were harder to catch than young ones. Hence the options. Most importantly in this action it recalled the sacrifice of the Hebrews back in the time of the Exodus and the tradition continued and Jesus was very much in the tradition, thus at 33 days what was 'required of the law of the Lord' had been performed.

Luke then introduces 'a man in Jerusalem' **Simeon** his name. He further describes significant characteristics: he is 'righteous and devout.' And he is looking toward 'the consolation of Israel' – this being a time when expectations of God's presence would be fulfilled, it was a common Jewish prayer, rather like our 'Come Lord Jesus'. And more – Luke notes 'the Holy Spirit rested on him.' This was the way it happened usually for special events, before the coming and filling of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit had revealed to him he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. This was the day! Tenderly Simeon takes the baby in his arms and gives praise to God.

How much is said in those few sentences: 'my eyes have seen your salvation,...light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory of your people Israel.' All round there was a sense of a spiritual darkness. Now in God's purpose light dawns in Jesus' coming. Thus the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...' And why candles are so appropriate symbolically in these feasts.

Whilst being in the Spirit, Simeon is led to share a prophecy with Mary, of Jesus 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...' This certainly was fulfilled in Jesus' earthly ministry and culminating in his suffering and death.

His person and message would alienate some, and did. One bible commentary suggests that Mary and Joseph were still coming to realise the significance of Jesus and who he was. Thus Simeon brings a clearer perception of the divine majesty of the child.

The prophecy then concludes with Simeon having a message for Mary: 'a sword will pierce your own soul also.' This surely foretold what would be Mary's spiritual anguish standing by at the death of her son. Those of you who have seen paintings or sculpture of the 'pieta', of the body of Jesus in his mother's arms will know just how spiritually moving it is to those looking on. Thus Simeon is given and shares deep spiritual insight of the recognition of Jesus and his mission.

Then we are introduced to another saintly person, **Anna**. She has been a widow for a long time, and worships with prayer and fasting day after day in the temple. To Anna has been given the gift of prophecy. This day as she praises God, is given a divine revelation of the destiny of the Christ.

Then follows a summary of Jesus' **childhood**, growing and becoming strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God was upon him.

In this reading then, very significant events and meetings take place, and hence opportunity for focus today. I consider too that a verse that follows connects, and is how we know what occurred from those early days. Luke notes Mary 'treasured all these things in her heart.' Whether Mary shared them with Luke or it was passed on to him, invites us to also ponder, and to treasure these early events.

What then might be significant for us?
I would like to offer 3 considerations.

First, in our regarding **of Jesus and who is was and is for us**. Over these last Sundays there has been a motif of *introducing Jesus*, as Lamb of God, Son of God, , and today Messiah, in salvation context, 'my eyes have seen your salvation.' Much more than a historical figure. The effect of our ministry is because he is Emmanuel, God with us. Salvation has to do with relationship: Jesus' commitment to us and our response to him. 'I am with you always...' 'ask in my name and you will receive'. Jesus invites us to 'abide in him', and promises us 'the hope of glory.' He truly is the foundation of our faith. Let us be disciples as we follow in his way.

Second, **meeting saintly people**. Simeon and Anna certainly were that and we're told that Simeon was 'guided by the Spirit' to come into the temple and meet the holy family. Anna was there, and also encountered a significant meeting. Think then, it may be you can recall meeting people who are especially 'saintly' or holy, or 'spiritually special. There's something about coming into their presence, God seems especially there. In such meetings and it may be you can recall such, I'm sure it is as Simeon 'being led by the Spirit.' Let me briefly share three examples of 'meeting' such persons. One especially was Morton Kelsey, a great man of prayer and writer of a number of books on this theme. He did speak at a meeting in a visit to our country, but what I remember most was his presence, greeting me, being there. And very much with a strong sense of the Spirit's presence. Another that comes to mind was a missionary Dr John Coleman who had been imprisoned and tortured in Iran. In his imprisonment, he was allowed to have his Bible with him. And I remember the spiritual significance of that meeting and of what he had gone through, and to 'touch' his Bible that had also been his comfort and guide and

consolation. A particular mentor in my early ministry was Valerie Underhill, a truly holy person. To sit with her was to take in 'vibes' of holiness, and come away encouraged in one's own ministry. Sadly she was killed in a car accident. That taught me to value 'the present' and not necessarily what might be.

Yet I don't think it is only especially holy ones, I believe that 'presence' of Jesus in those described is also, albeit to some lesser degree in us. I'm mindful of Jesus' promise: 'Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.' In that sense each of us is a sacred person. I am aware of this as we greet one another. We are special to each other and in us we carry the gospel message. Indeed may I suggest we *are* the gospel message. Remember St Theresa's prayer: Christ has no body on earth but ours....'

Third, the **message of the gospel**: 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'.... Simeon, given wisdom surely by God proclaims the message is also for non-Jews. That seems amazingly insightful for one who was steeped in Hebrew custom and looking for the Messiah and the consolation of Israel. What we read in Matthew's gospel, and here in Luke, is the revealing of God's purpose in Jesus, *for the world*. Let it be 'a revelation', that is, a revealing of God's purpose. The way the gospel writers interwove the message of Jesus not only for Jews, also for non-Jews, is truly divinely inspired. The message for us is I believe to have a sense of urgency for the gospel. Not only for ourselves but for whomsoever we meet. As mentioned, in that sense you, I *are* the gospel, being lived out in relationships and in our personal devotion. We are 'holy' to each other. The world 'out-there' may seem inhospitable in this regard. Yet so it was for Jesus. Nevertheless it is 'a light for revelation...' That's surely why Matthew ends his gospel with the commission, 'Go into all the world.....'

Finally, to return to the beginning, the tradition of 'Candlemas' was that lit candles were distributed to the faithful to 'go into all the world.' Symbolically we can recognise that in the procession at the end of this service, as we face the exit and today our servers with lit candles will lead us out. May God be praised!