

Candlemas 2023

Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

These past few weeks we have considered our blessed nature as baptised Christians and our task under God to live our lives enlightened by this and use it as a catalyst to respond to God's wider calling on our lives. This week we return to Jesus' childhood on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, a feast more commonly known as Candlemas. Candlemas marks the end of our Christmas and Epiphany season.

After the Visit of the Wise Men and the threat of persecution from the evil King Herod, Mary and Joseph escape into Egypt. They later return to live and make their home in Nazareth. Events all relayed in Matthew's Gospel.¹

Luke's Gospel knows nothing of this drama. After the birth narrative and the visit of the shepherds, Luke instead tells of Mary and Joseph bringing their infant son to the Temple. But this episode is not without its drama either.

According to their cultural customs, Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple to give thanks for his safe delivery and Mary's visit marks the end of her purification following the birth. Until relatively recently, this tradition continued in the church with most mothers coming to be 'Churched' a short while after they had given birth. The underlying reasons were the same; to give thanks for the baby's safe delivery and for the mother returning to full health. We take these things for granted today, with the blessed advance of modern medicine, and we should not therefore be surprised if our thankfulness to God for it has somewhat waned as our sense of entitlement has increased.

¹ Matthew 2

Anyhow, Mary, Joseph and Jesus arrive at the Temple to dutifully engage in what was required of them under the Law of Moses, designed to keep them right with God. As poor people, Mary and Joseph were permitted to bring a second pigeon or turtledove, instead of a Lamb.

After they arrive at the Temple, they meet the old man Simeon. He takes the child in his arms and speaks mysteriously about him. Simeon had lived a long and devout life, waiting for the arrival of the one who would bring salvation. The second he saw the infant Jesus, he believed that wait had come to an end. He knew he could now die happily and at peace and we can feel the elation in his words:

“Master you are now dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared
in the sight of all peoples,
a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people
Israel.”²

No sooner has he acknowledged God’s action, he blesses them all and then turns to Mary and addresses her directly, and his words end with a message every mother must fear to hear. He says: This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the secret thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.³

These chilling words of Simeon indicate the reality of future suffering. Discipleship is never without its challenges.

We regularly say the words of Simeon at Evensong or Compline and at Funerals. The translation of the King James Version with its haunting opening line might be the most gravitating: ‘Now Lord

² Luke 2:29-32

³ Luke 2:33-35

lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.’ It speaks the desire of every human heart at the end of the day and at the end of life.

I used to have a very dear friend called Fr Timothy who was a monk. He was 95 and had been a member of the monastic community most of his adult life. When I asked him what he prayed for, he said to me: ‘I have been praying the same prayer for the last 70 years. It is one of the last things we pray everyday in the monastery and it was also the words of a man who lived 2000 years ago and was of a similar age to me now. I have seen my saviour every day, and I pray that I may depart in peace’.

As a Parish Priest, I get to see people at extreme moments in their lives. When they are excited and expectant leading up to their wedding. Feeling elation at the birth of their child. Panicked and anxious because of hardships or issues around work and security. Confused and worried as they or a loved one battles a significant illness. Distraught having lost their nearest and dearest. Longing for peace and comfort as their own life is drawing to a close. Each can be a moment when they recognise God in their lives and take the next step. But it is at the point of death or having lost a loved one that they really begin to take God seriously, one way or another.

If that death is tragic or sudden, the response can be more extreme.

Simeon describes Jesus as destined for the falling and rising of many, as a sign that would be opposed, and he refers to the sword that will pierce his mother’s soul. But these words are not just a prophecy that speak of Jesus being rejected and cruelly killed, nor of Mary’s pain at witnessing first-hand the crucifixion of her son. They go much deeper than that. They are imparting a timeless wisdom about this life and its dispositions. Jesus will be the indicating factor. At a time of crisis some will open themselves to him, others run away. Their response lays bare the thoughts of their hearts and their deepest selves. They are left confronting what really matters to them.

I wonder, what matters to us?

Simeon has discerned the message of the child in his arms. It is a message of unlimited loving; a life that will bring light and life fired by love.

Our lives rise and fall by the path we follow. If we can manage to follow the path of the child in Simeon's arms then love without reserve will fuel us and we will be led to light and life. But we must be clear. Even if we act from the highest motives the immediate result may still be painful and gruelling. Simeon's warning to Mary, is a warning to us as well. Whatever the tragedy, we must not yield to the temptation towards hopelessness, despondency, betrayal or self-loathing. We must hang on with love, not bitterness.

We will not heal all at once, it will take time. But little by little peace will come. We just have to recognise Jesus for who he is. I hope that in God's mercy, he will send a loved one, maybe even Fr Timothy, to greet me after my death and lead me to the light. That is why each evening before bed I quietly whisper a prayer: 'Now Lord let your servant depart in peace'.

Amen.