

Sermon – The Presentation of Christ

In our Gospel passage we join Mary and Joseph for an important rite of passage – the presentation of Jesus in the temple. This was traditionally done 40 days after the birth of a child, and involved prayers to purify the mother and the consecration of the child. As a firstborn son, there would have been prayers for Jesus, most likely giving thanks for his birth and blessing him as he continued to grow. In an era where child mortality was significant, there would also have been prayers for his health and safety. They would have offered a sacrifice, in accordance with the law. This ritual reminds us that Jesus was raised as an observant Jew, following the commandments and the law, and revering God.

At the temple Mary, Joseph and Jesus encounter two people – two prophets – who respond to meeting the infant Jesus.

They first meet Simeon. Simeon was a patient man, who was waiting to see the Lord's anointed, as was promised to him. He sees Jesus, and is moved to speak. He says the beautiful words which have become famous as the 'Nunc Dimittis', and are still sung at Evensong services in thanksgiving and gratitude to God.

Simeon declares Jesus to be the fulfilment of prophecy, and speaks of him as a light to all the world. Simeon speaks of Jesus being both a light to the Gentiles, and to the Jews. He sees him as the one who will unite all humanity and bring them to God.

Mary and Joseph are amazed at what Simeon says, yet he has more to say to them. Simeon affirms just how important Jesus will be to the world, but he offers a warning. He acknowledges that Jesus will face opposition, and that his path will not be easy. He also acknowledges that Mary will suffer as she witnesses what will happen to her son. As a prophet, Simeon is not willing to entirely sugar-coat his prophecy and what he knows, he will speak the truth to these people, because it is important.

After their meeting with Simeon, they encounter Anna. Anna is the daughter of Phanuel, and is a regular worshipper in the temple. She is described as being there both day and night, offering her prayers and devotion to God.

When she sees Jesus, she speaks "about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem". Both Simeon and Anna want those around them, and the whole world, to know what they know – that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who has been so long awaited, and in whom they hope for humanity and the future.

When Mary and Joseph have done everything that was required by custom and religious law, they return to their home in Galilee. Jesus, then only 40 days old, continues to grow,

surrounded by their love and care, and the love and adoration of those like Simeon and Anna, who have seen him, and understand all that his presence among humanity means.

Discussing the Presentation of Christ is only one facet of today's commemoration. Today is also celebrated as Candlemas, and there are some lovely traditions associated with the day. Candles, and their association with light, gave today its name as we celebrate Jesus as the "light to lighten the Gentiles", as mentioned in the Nunc Dimittis, and more widely, as the 'light of the world'. Jesus is the candle by which we light our way throughout the metaphorical darkness of the world. It's a rather comforting image, when you think of a candle as not only a source of light, but of hope and confidence when we face a dark or gloomy room that needs illumination.

There is also a broader tradition regarding candles. On Candlemas, in the time before domestic electricity and electric lighting in houses, people would bring a supply of candles to Church in order for them to be blessed, and then taken away to be used at home. The Church's supply of candles for the year ahead might also be blessed during the liturgy. The candles brought to the church either were, or would represent some of the candles which would light the house for the year to come. This both gave thanks for the light that guided us, but also gave thanks for the candles themselves and the resources used to make them.

This is why people are given a candle at this service, which they hold as it is lit during the service to help us give thanks, and to remind us of the presence of Christ with us. We will take the candles we are given for this service with us, as a symbol of the light we carry. I hope that you will light it when you feel the need to a tangible symbol of Christ's presence with you, and the hope that is both within you, and represented by Christ.

To finish, there is an Italian proverb that I would like to share with you. It is this: "A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle". It means that sharing knowledge or kindness does not diminish your own. In fact, sharing that light brightens the world, candle by candle. So please be willing to share the knowledge you have, the goodness within you, and the hope that inspires you. Because the world needs all those gifts, and you will brighten the world by doing so, to the glory of God.

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