

Sermon – Sunday 28th January 2018 – Candlemas – 9.30 am

A colleague said to me a week or so ago that she was given one piece of advice at theological college that has remained with her ever since. Every clergy person should have a sign in a prominent place – perhaps the back of the toilet door – which says the following: “There is a Saviour. It’s not you.”

For all of us, I think, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees, to maintain a sense of proportion in life. The Church of England as an organisation is no different, and in the never-ending calls to grow church numbers it can feel, as a Vicar, that a great deal rests on our own shoulders. In this context, my colleague’s advice provides a welcome perspective.

And yet, what I do in my vocation as a Vicar, just as what you do in your own discipleship, matters – we all make a difference. So while it is undoubtedly true that saving souls in Cuddington doesn’t rest on any of our shoulders individually, that doesn’t mean that nothing we do here is of any value. It all matters – and holding the significance of who we are and what we do with the need for a healthy sense of perspective is a tension we live with all the time.

And holding onto tensions is an inherent part of life. Just ask any parent. I have spoken to friends of mine – mums and dads – who have described the overwhelming love they have felt at the birth of their child. Something they had never experienced before. But how does it then feel when those beloved children are struggling at school, are being bullied, or unable to keep up with the work? Where there is such overwhelming love, there is the capacity for pain, too.

We can experience similar tension in other relationships. However much we love one another, we can annoy one another, too. We’re social beings; we need other people and long for company. But we are individuals, too. There can be tension between our desire for company and our wish to have it on our own terms.

At the heart of the gospel reading this morning is an excruciating tension. For those of you who, like me, are lovers of traditional choral evensong, it is impossible to hear the beautiful words of Simeon without hearing the soaring cadences of your favourite Nunc Dimittis. This story from Luke’s gospel tells us that Simeon, a righteous and devout man, has had it revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he has seen the Lord’s Messiah. And when Jesus is presented by his parents at the Temple, he knows that his time has come. The words that follow are his acknowledgement of that fact, recognising Jesus as the Messiah – the one who will save Jew and Gentile alike. And those words have become the familiar Nunc Dimittis that we hear during the service of Evensong and sometimes also at funerals.

But Simeon says something else, too. As well as recognising Jesus as the Messiah, he addresses Mary with these words: ‘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 inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

Can you hear that tension? Jesus may be the Messiah, but he will face opposition. And for Mary herself, the pain will be close to unbearable. There will be times of the most amazing revelation – and times of the darkest agony too. It’s the last thing a parent wants to hear, but it lies at the heart of this story – and we would be foolish to ignore it. Because it is surely part of our own life experience.

I don't know about you, but I don't always find reading the Bible easy. When I read a novel, I know what to expect. Characters are developed so that I can relate to them and their lives are developed through the twists and turns of the plot line, set in a particular place and time. When it comes to the gospels, it is almost as though we know too much, and too little. Too much because we know how this story ends – we read this morning's story of the presentation of Christ in the Temple knowing the story of his life, death and resurrection. When you know what comes next, Simeon's words carry additional weight and wisdom – we know that what he says will be fulfilled, and we know how. Similarly it is so easy to consider the disciples very dull and stupid indeed when they fail to see and understand. Why don't they know how the story will end when we can see it so clearly ourselves?

But although we know how the story will end, there are ways in which we know too little as well. Even when we read novels, part of the joy is the way in which we fill in the gaps. Once we feel we have got to know the various characters in a novel we innately develop other aspects of their story. It is part of why it can be such a disappointment to see a favourite book made into a film if the characters simply don't match the picture we had in our own mind.

In the Bible, where we don't have the chance to develop characters in the same way, we have very little to go on as we try to make sense of the story. Characters like Simeon and Anna appear only here in the New Testament. The only information we have about these two people is what you have heard this morning. It's not much to work with, is it?

But I wonder how much you fill in the back story? I find it very easy to hear that Simeon was wise and devout and to feel inadequate. To be inspired, perhaps, but also to marvel at such a depth of faith that could keep him waiting and leave him so sure when Jesus is brought to the Temple that this is what he was waiting for.

Sometimes I like to wonder about the rest of Simeon's life that we do not hear about. I might script the argument he has with a friend, brother or cousin, frustrated because he felt sure he'd encountered the Holy Spirit, but nothing's happened. Years have gone by. He's getting older and older and frankly he's fed up and tired. He doesn't want to wait any more. And so it's with deep feeling and understanding that he can point out the tension that will exist in Mary's life – because he knows, as we all do, that life is never without complexity.

There is nothing about a life of faith which immunises us from the complexities of life, which prevents us from being hurt, which stops bad things from happening. But what Simeon and Anna point us towards is a bigger perspective. Candlemas is all about light. It is the day when we bless the candles for use in the church throughout the year. The candles which remind us of a light shining in the darkness. Sometimes that light may seem very dim indeed. Sometimes we may fear that it will be extinguished altogether. But the light of Christ – the light of God's love in the world – the light of a love that will hold us even in our darkest hours, when the tensions can seem unbearable – that light will not be overcome.

Life is not easy, and there are always tensions. But there is always love, there is always light and there is always hope.

Amen