

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 30th January 2022
Candlemas (The Presentation of Christ in the Temple)

Collect

Lord Jesus Christ,
light of the nations and glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy
to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God.

Amen.

Malachi 3:1-5

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, '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.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Sermon

I wonder whether you've had that experience of listening to two people describe the same event – perhaps a holiday that they went on together – and wondering whether they were actually in the same place at all. As those involved in criminal justice will tell you, we don't always make the best witnesses. It's not that for the most part we are being deliberately deceitful. It's simply that we all experience things in different ways, and the things that we recall say something about us, as well as about the experience itself.

In the Bible, we have four different Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each one developed from an oral tradition, and was then written down to tell people the good news of Jesus's life, death and resurrection. If we try to map exactly what each of the four authors has written, we will find some contradictions, and we will find that some stories do not appear in all of the gospels. It's not that the writers were trying to deceive anyone. It's simply that each one brings a particular perspective. Both because of their own perspective, and the audience that they had in mind, each has chosen to focus on slightly different aspects of the good news.

This morning's gospel reading comes from Luke. In some ways I like to think of Luke's gospel as the musical theatre of the Bible. Particularly in the opening chapters, the various characters just can't help bursting into song. First, when Mary visits Elizabeth, she sings her song of praise, beginning with those familiar words, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Those of you who attend Evensong will recognise that Mary's words are the foundation of the Magnificat.

In true musical theatre style, Mary has barely drawn breath, when Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, struck dumb when an angel told him that he would have a son, himself bursts into song when the son is born. Once again it's a song in praise of God – "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free." This is the Benedictus that is said daily at Morning Prayer.

It's not just the songs that are unique to Luke, though. There is also a great equality about his gospel. In a society that privileged the voice of men, Luke was different. In the first chapter of his gospel, the angels speak to women as well as men. And we hear from women as well as men. There is almost a pairing of Mary and Zechariah as each in their turn gives glory to God, and points the way to Jesus and all he will do. Neither is it just gender equality that we see in Luke's gospel. While none of the gospel writers would deny Jesus's affinity with the poor and those on the margins, this theme is perhaps the most developed and evident in Luke's gospel. In the Magnificat, Mary directly states that Jesus will be on the side of the poor and hungry, while those who are well fed will go away empty. The lowliness of Jesus's birth is part of who he is as well as his vocation.

So with that background, we are ready to explore this morning's gospel reading, the familiar story of Jesus's presentation at the Temple. Mary and Joseph are doing what observant Jews did. The presentation at the Temple marks Mary's ritual purification after childbirth as well as the presentation of the firstborn son 33 days after circumcision. And there are things to notice that would have been picked up by those first listeners, that may not be obvious to us. For example, Mary and Joseph are following the law set out in Leviticus 12, which states that a pigeon or dove is presented as a sin offering by those who cannot afford a sheep. So Luke is reminding us of Jesus's humble birth. That he is on the side of the poor from the very start.

And then we are introduced, first to Simeon, and then to Anna. Do you see it again? A man and a woman, each of whom will tell us something about who Jesus is. Just like Mary and Zechariah, except that this time it is external verification, rather than family. And, just like Mary and Zechariah, Simeon bursts into song – the familiar words of the Nunc Dimittis which we hear in Evensong. Words that amaze even Mary and Joseph in what they say about Jesus, and which are echoed in the brief description we have of Anna’s own testimony – which was given to those looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke is an extraordinary storyteller. It is almost as though his words paint a picture, so that we can all enter into the story that he is telling. He describes characters deftly – in very few words, we are convinced of the trustworthiness of both Simeon and Anna; of our need to listen to their testimony and take heed. Just as Mary hears Simeon’s words and knows that they contain a painful truth.

I began by saying that, in criminal justice terms, we can be poor witnesses. Yet we know from our experience of the four gospel writers that differences in people’s testimony’s need not prevent us from drawing closer to the truth. Indeed, while we may each have our favourite of the gospels, many of us will also acknowledge that our understanding of Jesus is deeper for the fact that there are four writers, each giving their own perspectives.

And we, too, are called to bear witness in our own ways. To, in the words of 1 Peter, “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.” And, as 1 Peter goes on to say, “do it with gentleness and reverence.”

How, I wonder, do you gently and reverently bear witness to the hope that you find in Christ? The witness that we see in Simeon and Anna is breathtaking – two individuals waiting patiently to see the Messiah. Waiting patiently in prayer and fasting; righteous and devout.

I don’t know about you, but there are times when I read about such characters and feel a little as though I can never match up. That my witness can never be sufficient.

But that simply can’t be true. We enter into these stories from a different time and different place *not* to feel inadequate about our own witness, but rather to be inspired to recognise the signs of Christ in our own lives. Simeon and Anna had a particular experience to tell, seeing the infant Jesus in person in the Temple. We have our own stories. The times when we think we may have experienced something significant. When we have glimpsed something of Christ. When we have been involved in something that seemed somehow bigger than the sum of its parts. We, too, have the opportunity to gently and reverently bear witness to the power of God’s love to shape and transform. Perhaps we can take something from the stories of Simeon and Anna to guide us in our own witness in the days and weeks to come.

Amen