

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021**  
**Candlemas**

**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, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus 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

In Matthew's gospel, part way through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." This message forms part of the story Luke narrates of the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. None of the other gospels tell us about this event yet every year, on or around the 2<sup>nd</sup> February, we hear this wonderful story from the second chapter of Luke's gospel.

There is something about story that somehow makes the fulfilment of the law seem less harsh. Yet Luke is very clear that by bringing Jesus to the Temple, Mary and Joseph are following the rules set down in the twelfth chapter of Leviticus, an act of purification, as well as the presentation of their first born son. Jesus's parents are bringing their child up as a faithful, observant Jew – a message that will be reinforced when we hear of the 12 year old Jesus staying at the Temple after his parents have departed, and something that will prove a key part of his identity when he quotes from the prophet Isaiah at the start of his own ministry.

As always, though, Luke's use of narrative makes us dig just a little deeper. What will have been clear to his early readers is that in bringing a pair of turtle-doves or pigeons, Mary and Joseph are not well off. Those who were wealthier brought a lamb as a burnt offering. Already, Luke, who has a heart for those on the margins, is placing Jesus right among them.

In many ways the story of Jesus's presentation at the Temple is a story of identity. Whereas theologians will get themselves in knots trying to explain how Jesus can be both fully human and fully divine, in the hands of a storyteller of Luke's quality, this truth becomes almost obvious. Jesus has human parents who will have a huge influence on his life, bringing him up in humble circumstances as a faithful Jew. Yet as soon as Simeon sets his eyes on Jesus, he realises that there is something more. He has been waiting all his life for this moment, and he has no doubt but that it has arrived. So much so that he recognises that his earthly work is done. And if we require more witnesses, Anna, the faithful widow, is equally convinced of Jesus's divinity.

Do you notice, though, that in both his humanity and his divinity, relationship is absolutely crucial. At the heart of Jesus – and therefore at the heart of God – is the desire to live in relationship with God's creation. While in his ministry Jesus will extend our understanding of family, encouraging us to love deeply and widely, he never rejects his earthly parents, and neither does he reject his upbringing. In fact, God has woven his humanity and divinity together in his earthly parentage, since it is through Joseph that he comes from the lineage of David – the line of the promised Messiah. Look at the ways in which relationship is fundamental in this story. Simeon has been shown something by the Holy Spirit that Jesus's parents do not yet fully understand. As he takes the child in his arms and speaks to them, he begins their journey of understanding.

Mary and Joseph's trust in Simeon is of deep significance. One of the things that I find the most inspiring about baptisms and weddings is the presence of people from different generations. So often in conversations with couples preparing for marriage they will talk about relationships that inspire them – grandparents celebrating golden wedding anniversaries; parents who still love one another after decades together. Likewise at baptisms there is a sense in which the wisdom of different generations can help new parents to find their feet. We rely on our inter-relatedness to help, support and encourage us throughout our lives.

And there is something about the story of Simeon which also reminds us of the ways in which we pass on the baton to the new generation. This year death has come closer than any of us would have liked – and often in the hardest of circumstances. It is not something any of us would have chosen.

Young or old, every death is a tragedy. Yet perhaps there is a hint in the story of Simeon that there are ways in which our relatedness transcends mortality.

If that sounds too other-worldly and intangible, Luke's portrayal of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple is also very much about this world. Perhaps the key is in the words of Simeon to 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."

Think for a moment. Which slips more easily off the tongue? Rise and fall; or fall and rise? I think more of us speak more commonly of rise and fall, rather than fall and rise. Yet the ordering here is crucial. Before resurrection comes death. Jesus will fall before he will rise.

There is an echo, too, of those words we frequently hear in the gospels, that in order for us to save our lives, we must lose them.

These ideas speak deeply of how we live our lives in the here and now – and how we make sense of them. The problem with our innate sense of "rise and fall" is that we almost inevitably assume that success is followed by failure. And even if we don't assume it, arguably we fear it.

Fall and rise is different. We may not choose to fall – we almost certainly don't. Yet life has its downs as well as its ups. And often those times are formational. Partly they have the capacity to be formational because God continues to be with us. There is no depth to which we can fall that places us beyond the reach of God. And sometimes, when we realise that God is there in that deepest, darkest place, we discover the meaning of transformation.

There is something important to stress. When Simeon utters those words, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too", there is nothing half-hearted; there is nothing accepting. Simeon is not making light of the agony Mary will endure – and neither should we. Life contains its tragedies, and they can never be dismissed, explained away, or trivialised.

Yet, in the child presented in the Temple over 2000 years ago, we do find hope. A hope that brings light to the darkest despair; that raises up those who have fallen the furthest.

So, as we bless the candles that we will use for the coming year, let's hold on to that hope; let's commit ourselves to sharing it with others; and let's rejoice in our Lord and Saviour, whose love will never let us go.

Amen