

Candlemas 2022 Sermon

Malachi 3:1-4 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. ²But 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; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 2:22-40 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses (40 days Lev. 12), they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ 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 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too." 36 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 seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 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. 39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Intro.

Candlemas – the presentation of Christ in the Temple: – the bitter-sweet celebration that links Christmas to Easter, the cradle to the cross. This story is full of examples for us, of reasons for hope, and delightful irony, as we shall see.

Let me introduce you to the main characters.

Mary and Joseph

There are Mary and Joseph, bringing their son into the Temple in Jerusalem..

They come to offer sacrifice for Mary's ritual purification, which, for a boy, took place 40 days after childbirth. And their first-born son's presentation, his dedication to the Lord. In Exodus (13:1)

'The Lord said to Moses: ²Consecrate to me all the firstborn'. After the exile, in Nehemiah (10) the people said ²⁵'We obligate ourselves ... ³⁶to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons.'

First born were 'holy' (consecrated) to the Lord. 'Jesus is a firstborn, but with a difference' (Darrell Bock) 'In the dedication the child is said to belong truly to the Lord. How much Jesus belongs to the Lord is something the parents will only slowly come to understand.' *Bock*

This is a poor family. They can't afford a lamb for the presentation, but are allowed to offer turtledoves or pigeons.

Three times we are told they are doing this 'according to the Law of Moses'. This is a devout Jewish couple. When we hear about obeying the Law of Moses we think of rules and regulations, But Mary and Joseph would not have seen it like that. Torah (the Law) was a gift from God to his people. Not the way you got right with God but the way you stayed right with God as a redeemed people. It was not a list of rules (although the Pharisees had turned it into exactly that). It was a joined up, wholesome way of life, a blessed way of life, given by God to be lived with joy. The psalmist wrote 'I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'(Ps.40:8) Mary and Joseph come joyously, to induct their son into this way of life.

As an adult their son will say (Mt 5: 17) 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.' In those same chapters, which we call the Sermon on the Mount, he will set out a better way still. So, Mary and Joseph are an example to us. Our Christian faith is not a matter of rules and regulations. What we are offered in the scriptures is a wholesome and joyful way of life centred on God the Father, through his Son.

Jesus

Then there is the infant Jesus. And here lies the most lovely irony. Mary and Joseph have come to the temple to offer sacrifice for him, to present him. What they do not yet understand is that he would offer himself as a sacrifice for them, and for us all. As Malachi prophesied 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.' And he will even replace the role of the temple itself. Let me explain

The temple was the place of God's focused presence on the earth, the place where heaven touched earth, and so it where sacrifices were offered for forgiveness, for ritual cleansing, for dedication and as acts for thanksgiving. It was where you went to restore your relationship with God and to draw near to God. But the adult Jesus replaces the temple. He himself becomes the place where heaven touches earth. He, not a building, will become the place where, whoever you are, you can receive forgiveness and draw near to God, assured of his presence.

Mary couldn't even come into the temple at all for 40 days after giving birth. She was ritually unclean. (Some may remember the churching of women) Once those days had passed, she could only come into the outer courts The Court of the Gentiles or the Court of Women – no nearer for a woman. Through her son she will have full access to the intimate presence of God the Father.

She and Joseph could not afford a lamb to sacrifice. Their son is the lamb of God who will take away the sin of the whole world, including their and our own.

A song often played at Christmas says

'Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you delivered, will soon deliver you
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Is heaven's perfect Lamb?'

Simeon, who we will meet in a few minutes, will warn her of the cost of that salvation for her Son, and so for her as his mother. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' Candlemas is bitter sweet because it points us away from Christmas towards Good Friday.

Malachi, who prophesied that the Lord will come to his temple, continued ²But 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; ³he 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.' What Malachi could not know is that Jesus would purify us by taking our wrongdoing on himself. So that we can stand in his presence and the offering of our lives be, as Malachi says, 'pleasing to the Lord.'

So, wherever Jesus is, there is forgiveness; wherever Jesus is, there is the intimate presence of God. And, by the Holy Spirit, Jesus lives in each one of us who believes in him, and in each community of believers. So St Paul says that each of our bodies is a temple of the Spirit, who lives in us, and together we are God's temple in each place. We bear the presence of God for our communities. Each one

of us is a temple, a God bearer, and evidence of God's gracious offer of forgiveness through his Son's sacrifice.

Mary couldn't know that then, but we know now.

Simeon & Anna

Then, the younger generation meets the elderly one. They meet Simeon and Anna, whom Pope Francis calls 'Senior citizen prophets'!

If Joseph and Mary were near the beginning of a life that delights in God, and in doing God's will, Simeon and Anna were near the end of it. They are wonderful examples of people spiritually alive and mature in old age, and an example to us all. Their lives are the consequence of week by week, month by month, year by year soaking up the scriptures. They are evidence of years of disciplined prayer and worship, with a resulting ability to hear the voice of God. Anna is a prophet. Simeon is deeply versed in the scriptures. They are an example to all of us. The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once said 'A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't'.

One scholar wrote this about Simeon. 'Simeon has waited, obeyed, and studied. He has immersed himself in and memorized scripture, so that what the Scriptures promises shapes his whole view of life and of the world. It has all prepared him for that moment when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he recognizes the salvation of God in the baby carried to the temple by a pair of peasants.'

When Simeon sees the peasants' child, he cradles the baby in his arms and praises God: "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” (Luke 2: 28-32).

We say or sing this at evening prayer as the Nunc Dimittis. Its short. It doesn't take long to read or sing, but its packed with insight about the person and purpose of Jesus. Every phrase comes from Simeon's knowledge of Scripture, mainly from Isaiah 40-66: Passages that would also be central to the adult Jesus. Above all it tells us that salvation is a person. 'Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 'my eyes have seen your salvation'. Salvation is a person called Jesus, its not a transaction. 'He dies, you're forgiven'. You can't have forgiveness without the forgiver. You can't have what God's Son has done for you without receiving God's Son. The offer of forgiveness can never be separated from the call to follow.

Simeon's song says that Jesus will be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (the non-Jewish nations), that's us. That's where the candles come into Candlemas. The tradition was that people brought their candles to church at the feast of the Presentation, to be blessed so that, in Christ, they and their candles could also be lights to the world throughout the year, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. This was before electricity so perhaps today we should bring our lightbulbs. The idea is that the light which shine sin and from our houses should always be the light of Christ.

Finally

There is one final thing to note from this story. It is a story about suffering and hope.

Simeon is waiting for God to comfort Israel, and Israel had been waiting for centuries. Anna has been a widow for decades, and she is on touch with others who, like Simeon are waiting, longing, for the redemption of Israel. They were both living in a world of where

suffering had become a way of life, and they met it with patient faith and hope.

We too are waiting. Is this pandemic really ending? It seems to have lasted for ever. What if there is a new variant? Will life ever get back to normal and what will normal look like? Simeon and Anna challenge us, challenge our culture of instant gratification, where we have been taught to 'take the waiting out of wanting'. They challenge us to patient faith and hope in God's long term sovereign promises.

We too share that hope, centred on Christ, shaped by scripture, grounded in prayer. This is the hope that will sustain us through this and every crisis, to the end of our lives and the climax of history. This is a passage which sets an example to all age groups young and old and in between, and the chief way we can be those candles, local lights for the world, are to live day by day in these troubled times on the basis of our hope in Mary's son.

Conclusion

So, like Simeon and Anna, we rejoice in the gift of our salvation, our incarnate Lord:

- The true temple, the place where heaven touches earth, through whose presence we become that place for our communities.
- The light to the nations, the light of the world, in whom we also are to be the light of our local world
- And the source of hope, in times of suffering and longing like these, right through to the climax of history.

You may not have brought a candle this morning, but you can be a light. May it be so. Amen

+Graham – January 2022