

heart revealed, soul pierced
a sermon preached on the feast of
Candlemas: the Presentation of Christ
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the lections: Malachi 3:1-4; Ps 84; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

And so it was, at the tender age of 40 days, a number set down in the law,¹ this fragile and vulnerable infant, whom John the Evangelist calls ‘Word made flesh’,² was brought by his faithful Jewish parents, to do what was customary under the law.

And, in the midst of making their prescribed offerings, an old man appears, “righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel”,³ one whose ‘soul has longed for the courts of the Lord’.⁴ And declares over the infant the same essential message delivered by angels to shepherds; that this child is Messiah.⁵

And old Simeon is overjoyed, just as the shepherds were overjoyed.⁶ And all this seems just what we would expect in a story of a divine birth and its promise. And the child’s parents were understandably amazed.⁷

But, suddenly, the tone of this joyous encounter takes an unexpected and threatening turn. Old Simeon speaks to Mary what must be some of the most devastating words: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign to be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed”.⁸ What mother wants to hear this! The child is just 40 days of age! What a shocking prophecy to place on his infant head! What a curse for this young mother!

‘A sign to be opposed’. The child’s purpose, his very *reason* for existence – literally his ‘destiny’⁹ – is to bring about opposition, to cause the community of Israel to be divided.

But why such a shocking destiny, why a vocation which sounds so negative to us, and which seems to contradict all our ideas about ‘peace’? For the simple reason that division is the means by which the “thoughts of many hearts will be revealed”.¹⁰ Division is how the inside comes to the outside; how the secret inner thoughts become visible and into the open, how the motivations of the heart are revealed. For the heart harbours, secretly, all manner of hidden motives; making what is hidden in the heart visible is the infant’s destiny, the Messiah’s vocation, the means of salvation.

Clearly this vocation will not be welcomed by those who prefer to not examine their motives, who prefer to work in the shadows of concealed hearts. This, of course, is all of us, the human situation.

The revealing of the thoughts of our hearts is a very painful business, generally speaking an unwelcome exposing of our insides. It is like being broken open; but of course! “Bread is broken so it can be shared, as in the Eucharist. A heart is broken [open] and its suffering is shared.”¹¹ And this painful revealing is the very means of our salvation; it has been said that “the heart is the point at which a mortal being encounters God”.¹²

We might have thought, at this point, that old Simeon has already said more than enough, that the infant and his parents have perhaps already received what feels more like curse than blessing. But he hasn’t finished with them yet; he has one more piece of destiny to deliver. Speaking still to Mary, he declares, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too”.¹³

We feel a kind of speechless disbelief on hearing this devastating promise; an unfathomable sense of undeserved curse. What on earth has Mary done to deserve such a curse! How is it that this courageous and faithful servant of God, who consents to the angel’s message, whose ‘Yes!’ made possible God’s taking human flesh, should be so treated?

A sword will pierce her soul. Pierce? We recall another occasion when Jesus uses the symbol of sword. Matthew’s Jesus famously declares: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have

¹ Luke 2:22-24

² John 1:14

³ Luke 2:25

⁴ Psalm 84:2

⁵ Luke 2:11, 26

⁶ Luke 2:20

⁷ Luke 2:33

⁸ Luke 2:34-35

⁹ Gk: *κειται* *keitai*

¹⁰ Luke 2:35 The word which the NRSV renders as ‘inner’ is in fact *καρδων* *kardiōn*, hearts.

¹¹ David Richo, *The Sacred Heart of the World: Restoring Mystical Devotion to Our Spiritual Life*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007, p18.

¹² David Richo, p14

¹³ Luke 2:35

not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to divide...”¹⁴ The sword is a symbol of discrimination. ‘Division’ is vital to the work of discernment. Jesus’ symbol of sword functions in a similar way to Malachi’s ‘refiner’s fire’,¹⁵ the means by which elements can be separated. Of course, the Cross is the Christian tradition’s principal symbol of this necessary division.

When these two promises are considered together, it is clear that the exposed heart and pierced soul are closely related. The inner dark places of the heart are to be exposed to the light, made visible. The soul is to be divided, sliced in two. This is the holy vocation of the infant and his mother.

But what about us? The meaning of baptism into Christ, in light of this gospel, is this: Every daughter and son of God is destined for the revealing of the thoughts of hearts. Every time we gather we pray:

O God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts...

Every son and daughter of God is destined to experience the piercing division within themselves, what feels like a slicing through our inner being.

Yes, we undoubtedly feel as inadequate to this destiny as the infant and mother. “Who indeed can endure the day of [the Lord’s] coming”!¹⁶ And yet, “because [Christ] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested”.¹⁷ And this exposing and piercing will be our salvation, and the salvation of the world.

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¹⁴ Matthew 10:34, 35

¹⁵ Malachi 3:2

¹⁶ Malachi 3:2

¹⁷ Hebrews 3:18