

open to the light

a sermon preached on

candlemas – the presentation of christ

4 February 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2: 14-18; Luke 2: 22-40

What a journey we have been on as we have moved from the celebration of the incarnation at Christmas, to Epiphany, and now to the Presentation of Christ or Candlemas. There is a bitter sweetness about today's feast, and its further striking revelation of the meaning of God's intervention into the life of humanity; an intervention that brings not only joy but also intimations of intense suffering and sorrow; a reminder that as we move shortly to Lent, we are on an inexorable journey from cradle to cross.

I wonder, when you woke up this morning and got out of bed, did you expect something wonderful to happen, the unexpected? *Or* did it just feel like a usual Sunday as you dressed, prepared breakfast, cleaned your teeth, checked the clock to make sure you arrived at church in time? Probably it was the latter for most of us if we are honest- going through our usual routine, barely thinking, maybe not even expecting to meet God here today, God who would break into our dullness in an illuminating way.

There are two older people in our Gospel reading who also arise in the morning, faithfully going into the temple as they usually do after performing their morning ablutions. We are told that day after day for many years this holy 'tag team' have hung around the temple; Anna in particular is always there. Perhaps they have been viewed as just part of the furniture by many, and maybe even somewhat eccentric. However, it seems that, unlike us, they *had* continued to expect the unexpected. Why? Could it be because they are open to it; they have been preparing themselves: looking, expecting and hoping for a long time?

In that waiting period they have been immersing themselves in the promises of God in the scriptures, and in constant prayer. So right *now*, Simeon and Anna are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit who has a major part to play in this scenario, and they are also open to the irruption of light into the darkness of waiting. They are, in the words of W.H. Auden in his evocative poem 'Musee des Beaux Arts', "reverently, passionately waiting for the miraculous birth". So they are open to revelation, to the implosion of God's presence in a little scrap, 40 days old, brought to them by two devoted ordinary and quite poor parents who are acting in obedience to the law as found in the law of Moses.

Let us for a moment turn our gaze to Mary and Joseph and see what they have to do to reach a point to fulfil their obligations. Let us walk with them through the then temple- a

temple with its massive architectural features which emphasise the vast distinction between humanity and divinity. There are also strict social divisions in the temple, and access to the inner sanctuary is increasingly restricted by concentric barriers. The first section Mary and Joseph pass through with their baby is for respectful Gentiles, and then a low wall of some kind marks off the next section that only Jews can enter. The first area in that section is called the Court of Women, and this is where they have to stop and where Simeon and Anna come across them. After that is the court of the *male* Israelites, then the priests' section, then finally the sanctuary itself, inside of which is the Holy of Holies which only the High Priest can enter and only on the Day of Atonement. And so it is actually in the Court of Women that the amazing news is pronounced that all these barriers will come tumbling down through the coming of the Light of the whole world. Thus when Mary and Joseph present their child, the *presentation* will turn out to be a *visitation* of the God of Love and Light coming among his people Israel and the whole world. And this *visitor* is to become *host*, inviting all, from Israelite women as well as Israelite men, to the gentiles and all marginalised people and strangers, right through to the whole of creation, to participate in divine life.

The Love of God for all, that has been there from before the beginning of time, is now revealed- the Love that is never exhausted, and never gives up. And these two older people, Simeon and Anna, recognise this and are vocal eyewitnesses. Simeon holds the infant closely in his arms and praises God. What would that have been like for him do you think? Gueric of Igny, a Cistercian abbot of the 11th century, describes it: "*Simeon on this day held the child Jesus in his arms – the Word – who was latent in a body, as light is latent in a wax candle...*"

And prophet *Anna*, with her impressive family tree, not only praises God also, but starts to speak to all around the wonderful news of this turning point in God's history. And Anna is so ready for this, having prepared herself for so many years, meditating on the scriptures, soaking herself in the promises of God's deliverance, and praying without ceasing – the true prayer of the heart. These are what enable her to be open to the irruption of divine Light in the infant Jesus.

BUT when the Light comes piercing the world's gloom, we can also expect pushback. And so there is the warning of further darkness to come- this small infant will cause division and conflict, and the Light he brings will reveal the thoughts of many hearts. The word *thoughts* in Luke's gospel depicts narrow, ugly, 'bad thoughts'. And 'hearts' points to the very depths of the person, the inner core. From our conflicted and divided hearts can spring destructive actions when the ugly thoughts, that we all have, are denied or repressed. The Light not only exposes that which is in our hearts but it is in the response to the Light that the true depths of a person are revealed.

The *piercing* of which Simeon speaks that will be experienced by Mary, is a very visceral word in the Greek, about a penetration all the way through to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. This is a piercing that God himself experienced in the crucifixion, and continues to experience in all places where there is suffering. And it is inevitable that in that inexorable final journey, Christ, the Light of the World, will suffer the terrified violence of those who cannot cope with God or themselves (RW, p. 122). The darkness of evil, malevolence and violence, appears to succeed at the cross, as it often appears to. But, as we know, and have been proclaiming on the signage outside this church for quite a period of time, *The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*. It never has and it never will. Resurrection will occur.

So the good news for us and for all humanity is that here and now, in the midst of the familiar everyday world, we are invited to recognise and participate in the Light that has

come among us. Faithfulness is necessary but *not* sufficient. Open eyes, open ears, an open heart are required; the ears of the heart as St Benedict would say. We see this prepared openness in Simeon and Anna, and it is cultivated through a passionate commitment to simply being in God's presence, soaking up God's love and light.

And there is one more openness: openness of mouth. We are about to celebrate something wonderful. We are offered the Body of Christ to receive in the Eucharist: the Body that is the Light of the World. So, as we ingest the Body of Christ, we meet Christ and take the Light into every cell in our body, the whole 37.2 trillion of them. This makes us incandescent candles ourselves, radiating light to others and shining to the glory of God.