

Presentation of Christ in the Temple 02/02/25

The strange thing is that many will never have heard of it. The Feast of the Presentation occurs each year on February 2nd – exactly forty days after Christmas. Most years the feast slips by us on a weekday, with perhaps a celebration scattered here and there. This year, however, February 2nd falls on a Sunday, and this great feast takes precedence over what would otherwise be the Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany. The full name of today's feast is the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. It's a celebration of one of Jesus' major life events; that's what makes it a principal feast. You may also have heard of it as "Candlemas" or "the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary." "Candlemas" because this is the feast when candles were traditionally blessed. And "Purification of Mary" because the law of Moses required that she - like the infant Jesus - participate in a rite of purification forty days after childbirth.

It began forty days ago when the baby was born: the boy who was born to be a light. Or maybe it began when the angel first told Mary of her special calling; or during the reign of King David; or when our people were slaves in Egypt; or when our ancestor Abraham set out from his home town of Ur on the Chaldees to become the father of more than all the stars in the heavens and all the grains of sand on the seashore-to be a blessing to all the peoples of God's creation.

Whenever we choose to begin the story, it is fraught with difficulties from the very beginning. Yet Mary and Joseph managed to rise above the uncertainties. They traveled to Jerusalem to face further public embarrassment. It was the custom to dedicate the first son to God forty days after his birth; to offer a sacrifice at the Temple to redeem the child. They did so to remind themselves that their child belonged to God. It was a reminder that God has a genuine claim on the best we have to offer.

The required sacrifice was a lamb, but those too poor to buy a lamb could offer the lesser sacrifice of birds. The crowds in the Temple precincts would know who they were: bird people were poor people. The consolation may have been that they were not alone. Many people were out of work. The land was occupied by Rome. Taxes were high and the government was unstable. There was resistance to the state of things throughout the land. Ordinary people had trouble making ends meet. The lines in front of the pigeon sellers, it can be assumed, were probably very long.

Mary and Joseph were faithful to the custom of the forty days: the number of days and nights of the flood, the number of days this child would walk in the wilderness tempted by the devil, the number of years his people had wandered in the wilderness becoming God's people in escaping from Egypt. The offering of these birds would be a memorial to all of the firstborn males ordered killed by Pharaoh in that first Holocaust — the one that only Moses survived.

The custom of forty days bound Mary and Joseph to their people and their past just as this Eucharist ties us to ours. They had come to make a sacrifice and a commitment - which are really the same thing. Every commitment comes with a cost. Little did they know the offering they were making - not only to God but for the whole world. Nor were they prepared for the old man and woman they encountered.

Anna and Simeon had been waiting a lifetime to encounter the Messiah. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he laid his eyes on God's anointed. He had been praying and waiting, hoping and studying, waiting for God to reveal the light of the world. Simeon was an old man waiting to be released, waiting for his people to be released, waiting to see what we

all hope to see but are too busy to remember to look for: a glimpse of the future, a glimpse of the truth, a glimpse of relief and release.

Simeon had, we can imagine, like so many of us, grown weary: weary of the Roman occupation; weary of failed policies and programs; weary of the failure of religious and political leaders; weary of being weary. Everything and everyone who had promised life only yielded weariness and death. So he was waiting for death and waiting to see if God really keeps promises.

The old man took the child out of Mary's arms. Suddenly, Simeon became a poet for the ages: announcing for all who cared to listen and hear that the child he held was not only Mary's child, but God's very own; a child born to be light; light for all peoples everywhere and throughout all time. Simeon had seen the light.

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared
before the face of all people;
to be a light to lighten the Gentiles
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

It is, of course, a text well known to us Anglicans as one of the usual two canticles at Evensong. And it is also a prophecy. Simeon says, basically: Today I have seen my salvation, my Lord, my Saviour. And this God has made this revelation for the glory of his people.

"Can you see it?" he cried out. "Here is the light which will withstand all darkness, any darkness, even death upon a Roman cross." Then, quietly, Simeon handed the child back to his mother-and he is gone, released, God's promise fulfilled. Simeon returns to God as the mother and father look on: Joseph with the birds in his hands, Mary with the child born to be a light.

Anna we are told had lived 84 years - no easy feat in first-century Palestine. She prayed and fasted in the Temple night and day. But on this day, she noticed that something was different. She finds Mary and Joseph and the baby and begins to talk about him. "Praise be to God," she may have said, "for this truly is the redeemer of the world."

So we have a story about waiting, a story about watching, and a story about discovery. Waiting for the day to come, for the saviour to appear, for all things to be put right. Watching to see that the day has come, that this child is destined for the falling and rising of many. And the discovery that God has revealed all this to us: this light that lightens all the world, this child who redeems all people, this saviour who is Christ the Lord.

Like the prophet Simeon, we yearn for the coming of the Messiah, for all in this world to be put right: for the hungry to be fed, for prisoners to be set free, for the sick to be healed. Like the prophet Anna, we hope that our prayer and sacrifice and faithfulness will be fulfilled: that equality will come for all God's people, that peace will prevail over the whole earth, that justice will conquer all oppression.

Now we are here, part of that same crowd straining to catch a glimpse of the light. As it was for Simeon and Anna, a moment will have to be long enough. As we gather reflecting on the darkness that always seems threatening and uninviting in our world, like Mary and Joseph we come to remember our past and God's saving actions. We come to renew our commitment to our God and, like Simeon and Anna, to catch a glimpse of the light so we can tell others what we have seen; so that we can feel the release; so that like the boy who was born to be a light, we, too, can become a light for others.

In this short life we have really only have moments to catch that glimpse, and then live accordingly. If we do like Simeon and Anna we can then hold the light of the Gospel in our hearts and minds, a sign of God's holy Spirit of Love, which enlightens us and empowers us; to reach out to one another and allow ourselves to be transformed and to reflect the light and life of God beyond the boundaries of ourselves, our parish or congregation, our church, our community, and even our country. AMEN.

Fr Robert Newton