

## **Candlemas 2 February 2025**

### **The Presentation of Christ in the Temple**

**Malachi 3.1-5 (Hebrews 2.14-end)**

**Luke 2.22-40**

Presentations can be exciting occasions in the life of a family; lots of hard work will have gone into whatever is being singled out for special mention, and lots of people gather to applaud and celebrate the recipient. I was awarded the Junior Spelling Prize at an early age, followed by the Senior Spelling Prize, and later I gravitated to the German Prize and perhaps one or two other things. I can remember feeling really chuffed, and I am sure my parents were proud of their son. Whatever it is, it is something to be celebrated.

There are also other sorts of presentation, of which in a former life I have done many. These are business presentations, which after intensive preparation are made to prospective clients, in order to convince them that your company is the right one for their business needs. They are forward-looking occasions, with a very specific purpose in mind, but with baited breath as to the outcome.

Today in our worship we remember and celebrate another, very different, kind of presentation, involving a man called Simeon and a woman called Anna, but more importantly also coming at the end of a long period of preparation and waiting, now reaching its fulfilment, and for those with eyes to see, ushering in a new and unprecedented era.

Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord in the Temple, just as the Hebrew Law required they should do. Already we see that Jesus the Messiah fulfils rather than ignores or overturns the Law. And that could have been the whole story, except for these two strange elderly people who come and speak even stranger words over the baby.

If you have ever pushed a young baby down the street in a buggy, you will know how people come and coo and say how lovely the child is – even if he or she isn't! But that's not what's going on here. Simeon and Anna's words are not flattery or standard baby-talk but something altogether more disturbing.

Simeon has two sayings which are reported in the story. The first is not addressed to Mary and Joseph at all, but rather a prayer addressed to God: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace"... the words we sing/have just sung in the Nunc Dimittis. "Now I am content to die", Simeon says, "because at last I have seen the salvation you have prepared – not just for your people Israel, although Israel is included, but for all peoples – a light to reveal you to non-Jews as well as to Jews." Here again we see something very important about this Messiah. He is not just the one to restore the fortunes of Israel, as many had expected – and in fact he will not do that at all in any conventional sense. But he is the one who will bring light to the whole world, fulfilling the vocation given to Israel in the covenant with Abraham.

But this light, this salvation, does not mean that there is no pain or suffering to come. Simeon's second saying, to Mary, must have sent a chill through her. "This child will be for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign that will be opposed – and a sword will pierce your soul too." Luke clearly wants us to remember, through the telling of the story that is to come, that this Messiah has no easy journey ahead of him. This is not going to be a walk in the park, let alone a victory parade, not until the very end anyway. Israel will be turned upside down. This child will be violently opposed. And Mary, like so many others caught up in this story, will know unimaginable grief.

If this were not enough to be thinking about, then in comes Anna. Anna was a prophet, a widow, who had lived in the Temple courts praying and fasting since her husband died many years before. Whatever revelation from God Simeon had received about this child, Anna had received something similar, because she came

over to the baby, and began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. This again introduces a note of suffering into the text. The suffering of Israel, the suffering of Mary, the suffering that the child must undergo. Whatever it means that this baby is the Messiah, the Christ, the promised King that God will send to rule on his behalf, clearly this is not going to be a King who rules from a place of victory and triumph but one whose rule is rooted in pain.

So Luke has set up much of the story that is to follow just in the way he tells it. This baby is indeed the one who has been promised, the one who will rule and restore and redeem. But his Kingship will be birthed in and surrounded by suffering. He will tear down the mighty and lift up the weak. He will encounter hostility and rejection and will be a stumbling block to many. Grief will tear at the heart of his mother, and indeed of all who really love him. Yet out of this suffering will come God's light to the world, God's kingly rule not just for the people of the old covenant, Israel, but for all the world – a Kingdom far greater than most of Jesus' contemporaries could possibly have imagined.

How can Simeon and Anna inspire us, as we take our place in the story of God's Christ becoming King of this world? I suggest a possible answer could be two words, "patient hope".

Simeon and Anna lived in a world that was frequently hard to connect with the promises of God, let alone the assertion that he was in charge. Israel had experienced exile and now occupation, Roman rule through a puppet King. The gap between what life was supposed to be like and what it actually was like must have seemed unbridgeable. Sometimes when we look at our world, or even at our own lives, we see something similar.

People responded – and still respond – to that sort of situation in all kinds of ways. Resignation, cynicism, anger, despair – all possible responses to a world gone wrong or a life gone wrong. But for Simeon and Anna that wasn't the way. The way was patient hope.

Hope, that the present situation was not the end of the story, that redemption would come and God's promises would be fulfilled. Patience, that even though this might not happen today or tomorrow, it would happen. And that patient hope led to a kind of attentiveness to the voice and the Spirit of God – an attentiveness that meant that when God did act, albeit in a quiet and hidden way, they were there to see it, and they understood what they saw.

The collect for this Sunday encourages us to aspire to the patient hope of Simeon and Anna, that we too might be ready to meet Jesus when he comes and acts in our lives, in the lives of those around us, and in God's world. May that be our prayer, that patient hope may create in us a kind of awareness of the presence and action of God around us, so that OUR lives too might be in tune with the purposes of God for our time and in this place.

**Revd Peter Wintgens**