

Candlemas/Presentation/Purification

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany + 4a. Lk 2 22-40

In every one of our families, we have stories of the first visit to the baby health centre; particularly that nerve-racking first visit with a firstborn child. Some of those baby health nurses could be pretty daunting people to meet. But I doubt any of them could hold a candle to what awaited the first outing of a baby boy in the first-century Jewish community. On his eighth day, he was taken to be circumcised and named by the Rabbi; a pretty rugged outing. But for Jesus, it didn't stop there, because he was also a firstborn child.

This meant that forty days after Jesus was born, and as soon as Mary was able to rejoin public life among her people, she and Joseph had to bring Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. This was Law for every Jewish family with a first child; a command that came out of the Exodus story: a reminder that God rescued all the first-born Israelite children from death in Egypt.

We remember how the last of the plagues sent on the Egyptians killed all their firstborn – humans and animals. The Israelites had been warned beforehand to sacrifice animals and mark the doorways of their houses with the blood. The Angel of death 'passed over' all the houses marked in this way – didn't go in – and so none of the firstborn in those houses died. This was the first Passover.

In Jesus' time, families of firstborn children went to Jerusalem to make offerings on the fortieth day after their child's birth; an offering for the mother's purification, and they also offered their child to God, and then redeemed him –

symbolically bought him back: a very profound ritual, laden with history and significance. We've just read that the holy family went to offer the best an average family could manage, two doves or pigeons for Mary's purification. They were also there to present Jesus to the Lord. And they should also have paid five shekels to 'redeem' him. ^(Num 18:15-16) But Luke doesn't mention this – some suspect deliberately. *"Jesus is never 'bought back', but belongs wholly to the Lord"* ^(Farris, 302)

Every family across the length and breadth of the Land travelled to the Temple to perform this ritual; there were probably several families arriving every day. But things didn't happen in quite the straightforward manner that Mary and Joseph might have imagined it would. As they came, they were greeted by some very old people who seemed to expect them; Simeon and the old prophet-woman Anna.

We read that the Holy Spirit had once revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't see death before he would see the Lord's anointed—the Messiah. And today, guided by the Spirit, Simeon came to the temple finally to meet the one God had promised; the one who would bring God's blessing to all nations. Simeon took little Jesus into his arms. He gazed on the face that Jewish people had been praying to see for thousands of years. Out of all those devout, prayerful people, Simeon was one who saw his prayer answered. Simeon, as did Anna. And then Simeon sang:

Now, Master, you let your servant depart in peace, according to your word;

for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all peoples; a light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.

Simeon tells God, 'you've done it! Just as you said you would! And I'm not just *seeing* the one you always said would come; I'm holding him in my arms. He's in *my* arms, so now I can know

the whole world is safe in *your* arms. Now my life is finally complete; I can die in peace; happy; content.' In our tradition we sing or say Simeon's beautiful song at the end of each day, and also at the end of every funeral. In the presence of Jesus, with Simeon, we may also welcome death with peace. And with Simeon's insight into Jesus, we see light given to all who are lost in shadows of fear and hopelessness. That's why today is called Candlemas.

And Anna was a prophet; a very old widow. She never left the Temple day and night, but worshipped there with fasting and prayer. When she saw Jesus, she too prophesied about this child to all who looked for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Think of their decades of waiting; Think of the turmoil of the world around them: an invading army; a king as bad as Herod the Great; a religious establishment obsessed with power and wealth; so many people missing the point.

Yet here were two people who didn't seek power or wealth; they didn't fear death. Simeon had longed for the moment which would herald his death. And today, when that moment came, he welcomed it as the mark of a life fulfilled – he saw only peace and hope in it.

Simeon and Anna had lived very long lives of faithful service to God. For them, this was at once a moment of exultation and of release. They could let go; they could die in peace; somebody else could carry the load now. It takes the eyes of age – the experience of years – to be able to trust that all this hope can possibly be left safely in the hands of a baby. It takes the certainty that God is involved.

Simeon's song is called *the night-prayer of his life* and it remains the Church's night-prayer; handing over to God the troubles of each day. Simeon and Anna give us a vision of that moment as a sign of new birth – fulfilled hope – joy and peace; an insight into our death as a sign of God's coming to

us; of God's love for us.

How does this connect with you or me? Is there a Simeon or Anna here, and is there someone here to hand over to? M.K. Gandhi revived a classical Sanskrit expression *Satyagraha* – holding on to truth – whose power he demonstrated in the campaigns he waged. We have faithful seers and servants here, people who've held onto *faith* for a very long time; people who received the gift of faith from their forebears, and who, by God's grace, have borne its light aloft for many years.

Faithful fathers and mothers of our church, I address you. Your children and grandchildren must hold the light aloft in a different world. What do you see ahead of us? Maybe you can help us better understand how to hold on, knowing that the life of faith is just as vulnerable and exposed as anyone else's life. How, in the Christ Child, can we see God with us in those trials and joys? Amen.

A hymn for Candlemas – Ephrem of Syria (4th Century Deacon and Hymn-writer)

Praise to you, Son of the Most High, who has put on our body.

Into the holy temple Simeon carried the Christ-child and sang a lullaby to him:

'You have come, Compassionate One,

having pity on my old age, making my bones enter into Sheol in peace.

By you I will be raised out of the grave into paradise.'

Anna embraced the child; she placed her mouth upon His lips,

and then the Spirit rested upon her lips, like Isaiah

whose mouth was silent until a coal drew near to his lips and opened his mouth.

Anna was aglow with the spirit of his mouth.

She sang him a lullaby:

'Royal Son, despised son, being silent, you hear;

hidden, you see; concealed, you know; God-man, glory to your name.'

The barren woman Elizabeth cried out as she was accustomed,

'Who has granted to me, blessed woman,

to see your Babe by whom heaven and earth are filled?

Blessed is your fruit that brought forth the cluster on a barren vine.'

Praise to you, Son of the Most High, who has put on our body.