

SERMON FOR CANDLEMASS | 05.02.2023

Malachi 3: 1-5; Sr Luke 2: 22-40

While it is not everyone's experience or choice, for some of us the arrival of a new baby in the family is a real joy. Yesterday we packed Catriona and Daniel off on a short holiday before they get ready for their first child to arrive in May. And little by little there is a real sense of excitement in the family. An app on our mobiles tell us his growing size - in comparison with various fruits! Sinead is making a beautiful cot quilt and Maria is preparing to read Paddington Bear stories which can be played to him even now: apparently they can recognise familiar voices even before they are born!

None of that, of course, was part of Jesus' birth stories but this Feast of Candlemass picks up the same emotions: here two new parents come to say thank you for the safe arrival of their baby son and St Luke makes quite a story out of it because it chimes with the experience of so many of us. We've been there: we've done that too. At a Christening/Baptism and in lots of family parties, a new arrival is always big news.

So there in the Temple Joseph and Mary are all ready to do the traditional things – offering a thank you sacrifice and waiting for the baby to be blessed. What they weren't expecting as to meet these two old people, Simeon and Anna, total strangers yet somehow keto parts of the story.

Churches are funny places! For the most part we know very little about each other, especially inner city churches like St James'. We do our best to get to know a bit about one another but it isn't very easy as we don't generally spend very much time in each other's company. Last week for example we made a special thing about two of our members having birthdays in their 90s; we are particularly concerned about Gloria who has been in hospital for a long time; we often think about Kingsley who is suffering from memory and of course there is the excitement of welcoming a new batch of confirmation candidates and we are learning more and more of their stories which is just a delight.

But when we hear about the way Simeon and Anna got so very excited to see Jesus, we are reminded of something important. That although each of us may or may not know very much about the people alongside us in the pews here, in God's eyes we are deeply connected with one another and our futures are bound together because God works through groups of people not through individuals. However much we feel we are walking through this life on our own, we are part of a huge network of people who are rooting for us.

Some of those people will remember us when we were babies, others have come alongside as we have grown up. Some are – and will remain - comparative strangers. Yesterday I met a visitor here who introduced himself by the name of Kip. In a short 10 minute conversation we discovered several things in common and then we went our separate ways. Others whom I met here in Church are now good friends because we meet fairly regularly and each of them play their part in influencing what I do and think. In that way churches have an almost unique role of making me bump into people and situations that I don't exactly choose but which have the effect of broadening out my world. And God I endlessly fostering those connections because we need each other's insights if we not to get stuck in a kind of 'woke' world where only what we do or think matters.

So Simeon holds the child in his arms and reveals his insight that this child will live and die for the well-being of others. He will be a light which will lead to the saving of Jew and Gentiles alike, the one chosen by God to be a wonderful judge of his people. And the one who would ultimately bring a terrible sorrow to his mother... How did Simeon know all these things? I have no idea but that is what religious places seem to be able to do: they have that amazing ability to show us who we really are!

And that might, for some, seem to be enough. Churches and religious centres like this one: wonderful drop-in centres where we catch our breaths and get time to draw on the comfort and grace that God alone can offer us.

And then the Old Testament prophet Malachi, writing in the mid 5th century BC after the excitement of building the Temple had petered out, roars in with the words we have as our first reading! Religion had gone to sleep; they were just going through the motions with formal services that were empty of any real connection with God. So Malachi says: See, says the Lord, *in this Temple where you are just ticking over, I am revealing to you my messenger. But who will be ready for him when he comes?!* Because he is not offering all sweetness and light, comfort and peace! He is coming as a very astute judge and his time will be spent working out who is really on God's side and who is quietly gpkig to sleep, hoping that all the nastiness would go away!

Even in these familiar walls, with the familiar words we use and the familiar prayers we share, God is sending us his wake up call. You might think that going to Church is quite enough to fit into our busy lives, but actually there is far more to being God's people than that. All the issues of our day included in the graphic on the front of your pew sheet – equal opportunities, diversity, social justice, class, education: all of these are where God is endlessly at work.

When old Simeon holds that baby in his arms he is saying; please don't get stuck here - with the baby wipes and the story books! Of course it is wonderful to welcome a new child into the world - but the challenge is see how each child, each person, can use their talents and abilities to fight injustice and evil in all its many forms. *I will denounce the sorcerers, those who tell lies and those who abuse the orphans and the asylum seekers, says the Lord.*

If we had time for another reading today we might well have waded into the short Epistle of St James who asks the question: *how can I show my faith? What can I do to reveal the faith that lies within me?*

Simeon, looking at Jesus, has the answer: by what you do not by what you say or believe. Just like Jesus, we can't just enjoy these Temples as places of refuge from the dark and difficult world outside. This is the place where we are renewed to go out and shine like lights in the world.

Whoever said religion and politics don't mix had never read the Bible!

When Simeon says *Lord, how let your servant go in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation*, what do you think he meant... for you, for those you love and care about for our community and for our nation?