

Presentation of the Lord

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Introduction

This text, coming a month after the epiphany, is a reminder of the events around the nativity. Often — and with great joy — the story of the birth and infancy of Jesus is re-enacted in Christian gatherings by small children in nativity plays.

But age demographic of many of the people associated with the nativity is not young, rather some of them are definitely portrayed as in ripe or old age. Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna — possibly Joseph too — are all people who are older, and it is towards and among them that these events happen.

Recognising the intergenerational dynamics of this text — where faithfulness, long practice of prayer and waiting was as important in the recognition of the Christchild as youth and wonder — demonstrates the necessity of intergenerational perspectives at any time of conflict, change and crisis. The story of incarnation is embodied in a tiny child. But is also a story of older people who are waiting out in hope during a time of unequal power.

Text

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Comment

Luke's gospel, particularly the early scenes, is not only a story of immense change coming to older people, but it is also a story of military occupation. We notice this in the Caesar-mandated census, mentioned four times in five verses (2:1–5). Caesar himself was recognised as "the divine saviour who has brought peace into the world", and in this light, the birth of the child (2:7–11) is a political narrative in the midst of an occupation witnessed by older people striving for their own freedom. The constant presence of occupying forces in Judea in this gospel – a gospel that records the death of Jesus by Roman execution – alerts us to the fact that for Luke political occupation is not a mere backdrop but a significant part of the plot.

In the midst of this political story of conflict, occupation and power, it is notable that Mary and Joseph, as well as Simeon and Anna, find the wellspring of identity, freedom and faithfulness in personal and communal practices of role and tradition. Such practices form, like any devotion or art, an inner core of comfort. In a certain sense, one can notice in pilgrimages, tradition, rites and prayers a deep, faithful defiance to the contemporary political machinations of their day. The practice is formative, not combative; it is nurturing, not reactionary. No wonder, then, that culture, traditions, language, faith practices and art are often the site of aggression during times of political conflict. These practices hold within them wellsprings of identities, histories and plural stories of belonging. If an occupying force can eradicate these practices, the soul of a people is wounded. So, practice of old traditions can be particularly important when public hostility is high.

In ritual and devotion, we see four primary characters, two women and two men, finding role and respect. Moving beyond political conflict, we can see the age-old conflict of societal roles: of religious people, of gender identities, of marital status and of economic level. Mary and Anna are each, in their own way, working within forms of their society, but they each, also, carry the vastness of imagination within their narrative and this vastness is seeking freedom inside form, rather than abandoning form.

When Mary and Joseph come to Simeon for purification, they are seeking
“*Katharismos*, from which the English word catharsis comes. They are seeking a washing-off, ceremonial ablutions. In physical actions, they are performing rites of cleansing and belonging.

What are the purposes of such a rite for this small family, coming from a place of political occupation, and operating within a religious framework that was itself politicized by the presence of foreigners who were not coreligionists? It is Simeon who sees that in the particular practice of his role, and in the particular small body of the child he is holding, that a universal light, a light for revelation to all the gentiles, the whole of the peoples of God, can be found.

This highlights a particular theme in Luke's text. Luke is writing to Theophilus to give an orderly account of the "things that have been fulfilled". Luke is always interested in responding to contemporary circumstances – even catastrophic ones like occupation and crucifixion – with the double-strand of faithfulness to tradition and emergence of the new from the particular.

Luke is, too, very concerned with gender balance. Gathered around this small child are two women and two men. In Luke's narrative world, stories of men are not told at the expense of stories of women. He is concerned with telling stories that upset patterns of only narrating stories importance, position, power and insight in male characters.

Response

Questions for conversation or personal reflection:

Simeon believed that he would not see death before seeing the messiah, and Anna also found in her daily practice that which she had hoped for — who are the hope carriers in your community?

What are the practices that they have? What value did it have for them in their time? What are the practices that give value to you?

The characters in this text are all taking part in public demonstrations of belief and devotion. This act is a demonstration of faithfulness as well as resistance. Where are the interfaces between public depictions of belief and resistance in your environment? Does this text speak to such interfaces?

What are the cathartic practices that you can practice — *while* conflict is ongoing?

Where are the deliberate places in your community life of intergenerational friendships and encounter. How can these be sources of wisdom, practice and consolation?

Prayer

God of all people and all generations

You who are always turned towards us,

May we turn towards you in simple rhythms,

finding in such practices the sustenance and nurture

to keep us steady through times of conflict and change.

We ask this so that we may look at you

as you look at us.

Amen.