

Presentation of Christ

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By Sarah Hills

Introduction

The presentation of Christ in the temple leads us into the mystery, the joy and the suffering of Christ's life for us in this world. We meet Simeon and Anna, ordinary people witnessing to the conflict that Christ is born into. And pointing ahead to what will happen when 'a sword will pierce Mary's heart'. Nevertheless, we have here a story of salvation and of hope. Christ joins us in our suffering and our conflicted world. And because of that, God's glory will be revealed.

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, 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

Candlemas, which we celebrate today, is the festival of birth and of light. It is also the story of living, learning and ageing. Life and death, justice and peace, living with the uncertainty and the numinous, and trusting in the light of the Christ – these are the elements of life and light and grace which burn in the candles of Candlemas. The procession of candles represents the procession of Christ to the temple, for the feast of ‘purification’ or presentation. These candles are also offered to us to be the light and warmth of God’s love, for ourselves, and also to take out to the world.

A few years ago in South Africa, we had just taken the cable car up Table Mountain in Cape Town. Table Mountain is spectacular – and a special place. You can see for miles – and you can also see Robben Island just off the coast, where the prisoners of apartheid were kept. It was very hot on the top of Table Mountain, but there was a very elderly black man dressed in a suit and hat. He was having difficulty going up a set of stone steps, so my mother, who is also elderly, gave him her hand and helped him up. At the top, he doffed his hat to her, and said, “Madam, I have waited all my life for this. To be helped and my hand held, by you, a white person – as an equal – is extraordinary. Do you know I am 94? And now I can die happy!” And they both laughed, and they both had tears in their eyes.

Fifteen years earlier during the apartheid regime, this could not have happened. These two people would not have been allowed to be in the same place – as equals. So what happened that day in this exchange between these two elderly people was extraordinary. And the old man had waited a very long time for it to be able to happen.

So what has this story got to do with Candlemas, and this gospel? We read about Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the Temple, and about meeting Simeon and Anna. Well, this old man reminded me of Simeon. A man in a special place – who was very elderly – who had been waiting a long time in the midst of conflict – who had experienced his salvation – who could now die in peace.

And my mother? An elderly lady – yes – but not Anna. Not a prophet. Just an ordinary person – like you and me – like Mary and Joseph. They had been ordinary people, and extraordinary things had happened to them. Not only had an angel appeared to Mary, and told her she was going to bear God’s son, but then in Bethlehem, all sorts of shepherds and angels and wise men appeared to worship her child. Mary and Joseph, being ordinary law-abiding citizens, did what was right. They took their new baby to the Temple to fulfil their legal and religious obligations under Jewish law.

So in this reading, we celebrate Christ’s presentation at the temple. There were in fact three ceremonies which had to be fulfilled at this time after the birth of a baby.

–The purification of the mother 40 days after giving birth

–The saving of the first – born

–And the presentation of a child to God.

Luke makes some important points. Mary and Joseph were ordinary – they were doing what every couple with a new baby had to do. They were poor – they had only two pigeons to sacrifice – not a lamb. But is this all that is happening here? Well no. While they were there, they met Simeon and Anna. Simeon, who Luke tells us was “righteous and devout, who had been waiting a long time. And Anna, a prophet, a true “elder” of the faith.

And Simeon took the baby into his arms – and something extraordinary happens. He looks into the face of God in this new baby. He looks into the face of light – of salvation – of glory. But Simeon goes on to warn Mary ‘and a sword will pierce your own soul too’ Her beloved son – the son of God – has come to be a “light” for all– but will achieve this not through great pomp and circumstance, but through suffering.

Going back to South Africa, I came across a story recently about Steve Biko, and his mother Alice. Steve Biko was a well known anti apartheid leader and in 1977 was murdered while being held by the South African police. Steve and his mother Alice were talking shortly before his death, and she was telling him how much she worried about him – she couldn’t sleep at night until he was home for fear of him having been arrested and put in gaol. He replied by reminding her that Jesus had come to redeem his people and set them free.

“Are you Jesus?” she had asked impatiently. Steve had gently answered her,

“No, I’m not. But I have the same job to do.”

And so do we.

Response

Our gospel for today is not just a story about two elderly people, a baby and his parents. Although it is significant that these are the people involved. These people if you like are on the edges –the old – the very young –the poor– the tired... Ordinary people struggling to make the best of their lives...to whom something extraordinary happened. And the ordinary can become extraordinary for us too.

This is a story about us and for us now. When we think of people on the edges of society –people in situations of war and conflict, those who have to flee, those struggling just to exist; we think of God’s message for us–that he sent Jesus to be our light, our hope. We, like the odd mixture of people in the Temple that day – the very young, the very old, the tired, the confused, the ones trying to do the right thing, we can make a difference to the world by having faith and following Christ.

We too, like Simeon can look into the face of light, of hope; and we too can have the faith to take the journey of peace and of hope that Christ has called us on.

Prayer

Simeon’s words, one of the great songs of the church – the Nunc Dimittis.

‘Now Lord, you let your servant go in peace:

Your word has been fulfilled.

My own eyes have seen the salvation

Which you have prepared in the sight of every people.

A light to reveal you to the nations

And the glory of your people Israel.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: