



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

30th January 2022

*Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Candlemas*

Reflection

If you do not live in France, you might miss some of the excitement of the Candlemas feast. Perhaps you see it only as the last festival related to the birth of Christ, bringing the Christmas celebration to a close. Christmas decorations should be put away, as well as the church's white and gold stoles and altar cloths.

Here in France, every child could explain, with twinkling eyes, that this is "la fête des crêpes", Pancake Day. After gorging ourselves on "kings' cakes" throughout the month of January, we embark on several weeks of pancake flipping "en famille". The shape and colour of the pancake evokes the sun's light returning, at last, after the long winter gloom, and the pancake tradition goes back to the 5th century, when the famished pilgrims who gathered in Rome to celebrate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, with torch-lit processions, could feed on pancakes.

In Marseille, there is even more excitement: people gather at the Vieux Port at 5 o'clock before dawn to welcome the Gospel which is brought ashore on a boat, thus re-enacting the beginning of the evangelisation of Provence, with the legendary arrival of Lazarus and other disciples of Jesus. The Gospel and a wooden statue of Mary, holding the Christ child on her lap, which was discovered in the 13th century on the shore, are then taken in procession to the abbey of Saint Victor, where green candles are blessed and distributed, as well as biscuits in the shape of a boat, the "navettes".

Wherever we are, we can celebrate today a joyful and meaningful festival. The many names by which this day has been known throughout Christian history lay out its richness: the

Purification of the Virgin Mary, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, Candlemas (with the blessing of candles), the Meeting of the Lord or the Great Encounter, as the Eastern churches call it. These names highlight some of the many themes that run through today's Gospel reading: purification, presentation, light, encounter.

Luke's story of the Christ Child being revealed in the Temple calls for thoughtful and patient reading, to allow it to unfold its many layers of meaning. In a very Jewish scene, of a family who faithfully fulfils the practices of their faith, the evangelist has woven many contrasts and interplays: law and grace, age and youth, celebration and judgement, keeping faith with the past and breaking new ground.

At the centre of all this is the Child. Substantial words are spoken about someone so tiny. A child born in poverty is brought to the place of God's dwelling and recognised to be the One who will embody God's consolation and salvation, recognised as the Light that will enlighten the Gentiles, and as the glorious Presence of God for his people. This Light will reveal the inner thoughts of many. The windows into the soul will be thrown wide open.

The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is marked by the extraordinary witness of Simeon and Anna, who persevere in piety and in the service of the Lord, even as they are getting on in years (Lk 1.7).

Even if Luke makes no mention of Simeon's age, the tradition has provided a portrait which the poet T S Eliot is faithful to: Simeon is 'one who has eighty years and no tomorrow' (*A Song for Simeon*). As for Anna, her age is worth mentioning and remarkable for her days – even more extraordinary is that she has spent more than 60 years incessantly worshipping in the Temple.

Simeon is one of 'those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not lifted up their soul to an idol, nor sworn an oath to a lie'. He can, therefore, expect 'to receive a blessing from the Lord, a just reward from God', to quote today's Psalm. After a life of prayer, Simeon is inspired by the Spirit to grasp the moment and to do what his life, so far, has been leading to: to recognise the Messiah.

Anna is a woman of great hope and expectation, aware that there are things yet to be accomplished and fulfilled, aware of the need for the coming redemption. Seeing the Child, she turns to praise: God has come to bring about the return of his people from exile.

Anna and Simeon are not the only wonderful examples the Scriptures provide of people who responded to God's call in later life: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua – like Anna and Simeon, they all opened to a new vision of God's purpose for them. God has a special calling for those who, in later life, with a wealth of experience, learning and gifts, have fruitful years ahead. God summons anyone at any time to service.

Anna and Simeon have awaited all their lives, we are told, the intrusion of a faithful God. In our age of instant gratification, we cannot even imagine what it means to wait such a long time. They can now witness to the arrival of peace on earth. It was their long experience of constant and committed prayer and contemplation that enabled Simeon and Anna to recognise the Christ when he came to the Temple. Their faithfulness and trust are richly rewarded: they are granted to see the new beginning which God had long been preparing for Israel. The dawn of a new covenant is breaking. This Child, whom they behold, would bring light, not only to Israel, the chosen people, but to all the nations. The joy and peace of God, which had been announced at Christmas to the shepherds, is now confirmed by Simeon to be a gift to every human being.

Having seen the Christ and spoken the words of the Spirit, Simeon and Anna are liberated to “go in peace”.

I would like to challenge the tradition that sees Simeon as asking to be allowed to die in peace, the very moment after encountering the Saviour he has been so eagerly waiting to see.

Of course, many of you are familiar with Simeon’s Song, or the Nunc Dimittis, either from our Compline services on Wednesday night, as an expression of our confidence in God at the end of the day, or perhaps from funeral services, when it whispers our hopes of eternal life: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.”

You may not be familiar with the Lutheran tradition of reading or singing the Nunc Dimittis after the congregation has received communion. Today, we, too, will listen to it, for in the Eucharist, like Simeon, we see and touch God’s promise of eternal life.

I encourage you to read again the Song of Simeon, and I hope you will recognise its language of freedom, rather than a desire of liberating death. Simeon is describing his own experience as one of being released from bondage, an experience of profound liberation that happened when he realised that God could come to us devoid of all majesty and could allow himself to be held in our eager hands. It is an experience of liberation and purification. There is now place for the faithful God to bring to birth something new in Simeon’s life. When God touches our lives, we can be sure that the best is yet to come, wherever we are on our life journey. Like Simeon, we, too, can receive the freedom to fully live a life surrendered to God.

The Song of Simeon is an affirmation of life, that overcomes doubts, that cuts the ties the world keeps us enslaved with. It is a dismissal, as well: we are sent out into the world in peace, to live as those who are beginning to know God’s salvation; to kindle our candles from the light which Simeon has testified to; to be filled with the light of Christ’s love and let shine its truth in the world. We are sent on a journey within God’s time of light and peace.

God is the journey and the journey’s end.

Amen. *The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*