



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

*31st January 2021
Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Candlemas*

Reflection

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One of the things people are finding most difficult about the continuing pandemic is the sense of life being on hold. Here in France, we wait to be informed of the new restrictions that will be introduced in the coming days. *'Il faut être patient'* (we must be patient), is the reply I often receive from a wise friend who has twice recovered from serious illness and knows the reward of patient waiting.

Patient waiting is the hallmark of Simeon and Anna, whom we meet in the temple this morning. They were marked out by their willingness to wait on God, in contrast to the hectic city of Jerusalem around them. Living examples of the notion that 'the best is yet to come', living with a faith that God has in store for them something beautiful but that they won't know it until they see it. Perhaps in a time of lockdown there are things we can learn from these figures, and from the reward to their waiting that is recounted in our Gospel reading.

Into the scene of expectation walks a couple with their six week old child. Possibly a little awestruck by their vast surroundings, coming as they do from rural Galilee, tired after a long journey and the sleepless nights of young parenthood, yet also with a sense of fulfilment in carrying out the required rituals of their tradition. The tradition was that a firstborn male child should be brought to the temple to be 'offered' to the Lord, though the offering was in practice 'redeemed' by whatever symbolic gift the couple could afford – for the wealthy, a lamb; for those of modest means, two small birds.

Simeon and Anna each become aware that this is the moment they have been waiting so long to see. Out of all the families who have entered the temple to perform this ritual, this one has brought the promised Messiah. Simeon takes the child in his arms and recognises him as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel'. A moment which reveals the significance of everything, not just for him but for the whole world. Simeon's words are an echo from the prophet Isaiah (49.6), who writes of the figure known as the 'suffering servant' with whom Jesus is so often identified: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' The blessing of God through this child will embrace all humanity.

The temple was the centre of everything in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. It was also the place where people understood that God had promised he would live among them. The prophet Malachi had foretold it, as we heard in our Old Testament reading: 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple', ushering in a new age of justice for the poor and the stranger. Like the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus went on to describe. And when Simeon saw the young couple with their child, somehow he knew that the moment had arrived.

In declaring that the child Jesus was the light of the nations, Simeon's words gave rise to the other name for this feast: Candlemas, the day on which traditionally all the church's candles for the year were blessed. People also used to bring candles (their only source of light) from their homes to be blessed, and in the evening they would place them in their windows. The Christian festival drew partly on pre-Christian practice, when Candlemas was the festival of light, marking the mid-point of winter. In terms of the church's year, we are forty days from Christmas and it is not long before we will begin the forty days of Lent. So it's a turning point, in more ways than one.

Candlemas is a reminder that the rich symbolism of this faith of ours can help us live more confidently through dark times. A candle flame is a particularly suitable symbol for the Christ-child presented in the temple. It is a source of light, but one that is vulnerable. It might easily be extinguished, but instead it sheds a huge amount of light around it. It gives light, but only by being consumed. The vocation to be and to carry the light requires a willingness also to confront darkness. Simeon perceived this too: thirty-three years before Jesus hung on the Cross, Simeon warns Mary of the pain which is to come, a sword that will pierce her soul. Jesus's adult life will embody the very struggle between light and darkness. And here in church, with the celebration of Christmas still fresh in our minds, in the short liturgy we will use at the end of our service, the focus of our imagination will move from the crib to the Cross. What Simeon discerned was that although the climax of the story might involve pain, it would nonetheless be a source of light to the whole world. We will light candles to remind ourselves that we must share that light with our world, in our time, and that the world is in need of it more than ever now.

Christ today still offers himself to be consumed, yet the darkness never overcomes the light. And we are sent to carry that light with us, however costly it may sometimes be. As we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews, 'because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested'. Carrying the light is our vocation.

What is perhaps most striking about this story, and of most help to us as we live through this time of dislocation and strangeness, is the acknowledgement of life's contradictions. The vastness of the surroundings and the intimacy of the moment. Extreme youth meeting extreme old age. Traditional religious practice encountering radical newness. Promise and fulfilment. Darkness and light. Sadness and Joy. Simeon intuitively knows that this child's holiness will be received by others as a challenge to their authority, and that it will lead to suffering. Yet at the same time this child's arrival is fulfilling the world's greatest hope. Living that paradox is one of the challenges, and gifts, of our faith.

So there is poignancy as well as joy in the Candlemas story, which is why it is very much a story for our time. At the end of our service, we will extinguish our candles as we begin to prepare to journey with Christ in heart and mind through Lent and Holy Week towards the stark reality of his suffering and death. But as we go from here let us never forget the light. For the good news of this child's story, the ultimate source of Simeon and Anna's joy, is that suffering and death do not have the last word. The story ends not in death but in resurrection.

The poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote that 'Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.' Writing with similar insight, a contemporary hymn writer offers us this assurance, and this prayer:

'For the light is stronger than the darkness
and the day will overcome the night;
though the shadows linger all around us,
let us turn our faces to the light.'

Amen.

Picture: The Presentation in the Temple, Fra Angelico (1395-1455).