

Sermon February 3, 2019 The Presentation of Our Lord in The Temple

Malachi 3:1-4, Psalm 84:1-7, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

“my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to enlighten the nations”

These are the words that greet Mary and Joseph when they bring their tiny baby to the Temple in Jerusalem. The baby is tiny. He's only forty days old, not quite six weeks. A baby of that age is a teeny tiny floppy little sleepy thing, still red and crumpled looking from just being born. The most sensible thing to do with a tiny baby like that might be to keep him at home. He needs warmth and quiet and safety. But Mary and Joseph have ventured out with him through the noisy, winding, crowded streets of the biggest city in the nation, a place they are not used to. They are from the much smaller town of Nazareth. And they have taken him to the very biggest, most imposing, most important building at very the centre of the biggest city, and at the very centre of the spiritual life of their nation.

We don't know exactly how they feel. The gospel doesn't say. But even if they *have* been there before, there must be a few butterflies in their stomachs at the sheer splendour of the place after what they are used to. After all they are very poor. We know that because of the first thing they do when they get to the Temple. They go into one of the outer courtyards of the Temple and they find a money changer. They need him because the only money they have is Roman coins and in order to buy anything at the Temple they need

Tyrian shekels, so the money changer does the exchange for them. They take the very little bit of money that results and they buy two turtledoves. If they had had more money, they would have bought a much more expensive yearling lamb and *one* turtledove because, according to Book of Leviticus, this is the required sacrifice for Mary's purification on the fortieth day after giving birth. But as it is they must make do with the two turtledoves allowed to those who cannot afford the lamb.

There is probably a bit of awkwardness around this. Everyone will know that this is what they have done and why. They may feel a bit patronized by some of the looks they get from those who see the meagreness of their offering. But it really means a lot to them to bring their firstborn son here and dedicate him to God, so they press on. They go into the Temple itself finally, Mary carrying the babe perhaps, and Joseph carrying the little cage of doves from the dove merchant, and they wait their turn to approach the altar. And there would be a fire lit for the burning of the sacrifice. You would smell it and see the flames in the dark interior as you came in from the daylight. And you would hear the chanting of the priests probably and perhaps some squealing or bleating or squawking as each sacrifice was completed, each animal's throat cut, and the blood drained, and the meat placed at the fire.

It is important at this point, to understand and to respect that this was for Mary and Joseph a very real, very sincere way of showing their devotion to God. It is so very different from our own way of showing our love for God that we run the risk of simply getting hung up on its exotic primitiveness. But to them it was as real and important as this service is for us this morning.

In the middle of all that noise and sacrificial drama there is an old man, a complete stranger, who approaches them - a slightly wild and woolly character probably. It says he is filled with the Holy Spirit. Simeon approaches them and wants to look at their brand new baby as people do with parents of young children. When my kids were small, complete strangers were always coming up to us in public places and admiring them and saying the most amazing things. Simeon is one of these. But what he says is just a bit bigger than what people usually say. He says, "Thank you God. Now I can die a happy man because I have seen this little baby. Because this little baby will one day change the world. He is a Light to Enlighten the Nations." And people do say things like this. "He is a Light to Enlighten the Nations." Usually it is the *parents* saying it to complete strangers about their kids, of course, and not the other way around. But they do say these things.

The thing is that this time it came true. He did grow up and He did do and say things that changed the world forever, perhaps more than any other human being ever has. People of every nation still find enlightenment in His example and that is really the main point for us. The point of all this historical detail that I have been giving you in story form this morning is the one I made with the children earlier on. We must find in his example a light to enlighten us, to help us find our way. We must shine it into all the corners of our lives. Ultimately the best thing we can do is to find that place at the core of our *selves* where His light already shines and build every thing on that. That is the point of the candles that the children will hand out at the end of the service, the same way that the infant Jesus gave light to Simeon. That light is the rock on which to

build our house. From that light comes all the rest and peace we could ever want, enough to bring peace to the nations. From that light Simeon could sing the song we know as the *Nunc Dimittis*:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word.

For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the nations : and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen.