



## Candlemass 2019

Picture the scene. The child's parents come to the temple with the infant and two pigeons. The ideal sacrifice of turtle-doves is beyond their budget. It's been a tough few weeks, travelling all the way to Bethlehem and back for the census has taken its toll, not to mention Mary having to give birth in the stable whilst there; and the time away meant Joseph had to close up his carpentry business for a while, so money is particularly tight. And now today, they've had to travel to Jerusalem to fulfil their religious duty. Another day's income lost.

As they enter the courts of the temple, the sun comes out from behind the clouds. As they enter the temple itself the light comes streaming through the windows. All is calm and still; this is a holy place; there is a palpable sense of reverence, wonder and awe. Suddenly an old man comes towards them, as fast as his aged legs will carry him. Everyone in the temple watches with baited breath as he seizes the child, his face is illuminated with joy. The old man's rheumy eyes well up as he launches into a prayer, a song of praise which punctuates the silence. All eyes in the temple are turned towards this scene. You can hear a pin drop. The priests, Levites and temple attendants hear the old man's words and come rushing to kneel down and worship this new king, this baby Messiah in their midst . . . But of course, that's not how it happened.

The Jewish Temple would have been crowded, noisy and smelly, full of hustle and bustle, teeming with both humans and animals, filled not just with worshippers, priests and Levites, but traders selling animals, and doubtless, money-changers too. The holy family would

have been hidden in plain sight, one of many pairs of parents bringing their firstborn boy.

This trip to the temple and what took place there appears only in Luke's Gospel, and Luke actually conflates two separate rituals which would have taken place some weeks apart – the purification of a woman after childbirth and the presentation of a firstborn son. Clearly for Luke, it is not the ritual but the encounter he relates that is important, which only further adds to the mysticism of this occasion.

The temple would have been heaving with people and there's no reason whatsoever to think that Mary, Joseph and Jesus stood out. In fact, there's every reason to think they didn't, as Luke tells us nothing of the religious ritual, the moment when Jesus first comes into contact with the priests, but rather focuses on what happens before – the encounter with Simeon and Anna. It's undoubtedly this prologue, these two elderly prophets and not the priests, that make this occasion so special.

What matters here is not so much the event, the religious ritual but the encounter. In the Orthodox tradition, this feast is known not as Candlemas or as the Presentation or even the Purification, but simply as The Meeting – the meeting of the generations, of these two elderly faithful folk and the infant Christ.

It is a thoroughly Lukan story – it happens quietly, the main characters being those who would have been largely overlooked by others. We can say the same of the annunciation – the news of God breaking into the world as a baby is announced solely to the unknown young virgin who will bear the child. In Luke's Gospel, there are no angelic words of reassurance for

Joseph in his dreams. There are no magi bearing gifts. Here in the temple, Jesus is still only weeks old and – according to Luke – the only folk who know about his birth so far are the shepherds. We’re told they related their experience to pretty much anyone who would listen, and that those who heard it were amazed. However, we know too that shepherds were very much lowly outsiders and not really likely to be listened to, and even then, not necessarily believed. After all, it’s a pretty remarkable story they tell, and everyone knows a wee tippie or dram helps keep the cold at bay when you’re working outside all night...

The fact that first Simeon and then Anna, realise this promise is fulfilled in the most unlikely of candidates – an anonymous baby barely 6 weeks old – shows just how open this holy sage and the widowed prophet are to the idea of God doing something bold and new. It was the heavenly host that alerted the shepherds to the arrival of Christ; now, here in this busy, heaving temple, it is the prompting of God’s Spirit that alerts Simeon and Anna that the Christ is in their midst. I wonder if they first started scanning the crowds for adult faces, or whether the shepherds’ story - strange as it was - had reached their ears in the last few weeks and so they knew to look out for an infant.

The Holy Spirit has promised Simeon that he will not die until he sees the Messiah. It is the Spirit which prompts Simeon to come to the temple today, where Anna has been living for many years. No doubt she had become part of the furniture, praying and fasting in night and day alike.

Their recognition of Christ, this moment of revelation is the culmination of years spent waiting on God and being attentive to the Holy Spirit. Despite the solemnity of Simeon’s prophecy, this is a story of great hope for all those trust, in the face of adverse

circumstances, that their faith will one day be rewarded; and for those who continue to pray, even when it seems God is absent. Anne Lewin writes: “Wisdom begins with attentiveness to God in prayer and worship, and alertness to the signs of God’s coming in daily life. And wisdom grows when we give ourselves time to reflect, and give God time to reveal truth to us. Simeon and Anna took time – time to stand on the edge of the mystery of life and wonder at it, just as children do.”<sup>1</sup>

The lack of any mention of the priests here in Luke tells us very clearly that these are the real holy folk, this pair who have been faithful to God’s calling and are still open to the promptings of God’s Spirit. We often speak of senior moments as a euphemism for the limitations of ageing, but Simeon and Anna have senior moments of a very different nature and calibre. As John Bell recognises “God expects old people— to be the sowers of new seed; to be midwives of change; to be the ones who recognise and name the new directions which society has to take; to be the ones who applaud and encourage young potential.”<sup>2</sup>

But of course, this moment is bittersweet, for Simeon is a wise and holy man and his prophecy can be nothing but unswervingly honest. He recognises that Jesus has come for all humankind and not just the people of Israel, but he also speaks of the suffering that lies ahead, not just for Jesus, but for Mary too, “a sword will pierce your own soul too.” It is that dual awareness of hope and suffering, of light and darkness that characterises our worship today in this final chapter of the Christmas season, this hinge point as we turn from the cradle to the cross, recognising that there is still much darkness and suffering in our world.

Here it’s interesting to note the linguistic reversals in how Luke relates this story. Simeon speaks of Jesus as an agent for, not

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<sup>1</sup> Lewin, Ann, *Seasons of Grace*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 20011, p .54

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wildgoose.scot/resources/advent-and-christmas-are-about-old-people/>

the *rising and falling* but the *falling and rising* of many in Israel. Similarly Anna lives in the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer *night and day*. Here I am reminded of Christ's words in John, of how the grain of wheat must fall and die before it can rise and bear fruit.

In reflecting on the Biblical events we contemplate during Epiphany, James Howell writes of how Christ came to be baptised by John to be cleansed of sin – not his own sin, but ours. Of this feast of Candlemas he says: "No one ever came to the temple for purification as laden with sin—not his, or his mother's, but ours—as Jesus. Notice the gender limitation in the text: "every male." Jesus bears even that narrow-minded injustice on behalf of all males and for all females."<sup>3</sup>

This episode in the temple is a key turning point in Luke's Gospel, in the relationship between God and God's people – all God's people (not just the Israelites), for this is the last time *in Luke's Gospel* that God communicates with humans through a third party. For hundreds of years God spoke through the Old Testament prophets, through visions and dreams inspired by the Holy Spirit or angels, and now finally through John the Baptist and Simeon and Anna who represent the last of that tradition. From this point on in Luke, God communicates solely through Christ. At Christ's baptism recounted in Luke, the voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Luke's is the only Gospel that includes a story from Jesus's boyhood – of how the 12 year-old Christ went missing for two days and was found by his frantic parents, in the temple in deep discussion with the teachers and amazing them with his questions and understanding. Jesus demands of his parents, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not

know that I must be in my Father's house?" Here there is no mistaking Luke's meaning as the Gospel writer adds, "But they did not understand what he said to them."

This incident comes immediately after the account of the presentation in the temple; already God is communicating directly to and through Christ. There is no further need for angels, prophets and visions, finally, the long wait is over; the Messiah has arrived and can speak for himself, and will speak not only with Jews but with Gentiles and all humankind.

The Feast of the Presentation is indeed, a feast – a cause for celebration for all God's children – regardless of age, culture, gender, sexuality, denomination or any of the other factors that so often threaten to divide us. It is a feast for old and young alike; those for whom hope and faith seem frail or feeble, those who feel alienated by their society or community, those who feel small in the eyes of the world, for those hold keep believing, despite what others around them and circumstances may suggest. It is a feast for those who need to offer their own blessing and know it to be received. It is a feast for those who have known the darkness but still believe in the light.

I close with a prayer:

Holy God, you were there equally  
in the joy of Jesus' birth and the sorrow of his death.  
Teach us to live with both the good and bad –  
the times of celebration and the times of despair,  
realising that though we may not see it  
you are present in both.  
So help us to have confidence in  
the safety and vulnerability of your love  
and bring us to the light of Christ  
all the length and breadth of our nights and days.

**Amen**

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<sup>3</sup> James Howell in Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration: Preaching the Revised*

*Common Lectionary (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Location 5977). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.*