

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple  
Year A - 2/2/2020

Malachi 3:1-4  
Psalm 24  
Hebrews 2:14-18  
Luke 2:22-40

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Some of you, if I asked you “how long is the Christmas season”, might answer that Christmas Day itself is the right and proper occasion to observe the festivities, and once that day is over we begin to move on - after all, there is the end of the calendar year to look forward to and celebrate, and a whole host of things to do in preparation for a new year. I find that for my colleagues in the northern hemisphere this is a common train of thought, as Christmas for them, of course, is not the beginning of the long summer holidays as it is for us, but rather seen more as a long weekend and people are back to work quickly afterwards.

Some of you, however, might disagree with this minimal observance of the feast, and as you sing the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas” you keep the celebrations going right through to “12 drummers drumming”, and therefore see Epiphany as the conclusion to the Christmas season. Perhaps, like my household when I was growing up, the tree stayed up until 12<sup>th</sup> Night, and that was the end of Christmas.

Well, today, I’m here to tell you that if you believe either of those two options, you have been short-changed all your life! Because, in fact, Christmas really only finishes today. Yes, you could justifiably have been celebrating Christmas for the last 40 days, since the 25<sup>th</sup> December - and you would have the full backing of the church in doing so.

So, it is this morning that is the last opportunity until December for any of us to wish each other a happy Christmas, for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is the last of the 40 days of the Christmas season.

At the end of these 40 days we can look back and take stock. We've celebrated the birth of Jesus as the baby in Bethlehem, the visit of the Wise Men, Jesus' Baptism, his calling of the first disciples, the beginning of his ministry, and now, today, we look back 30 years to the time when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be presented (or offered) to God in the Temple.

This feast, then, is about looking back and taking stock. Well yes - and no - for as we shall see it's also about looking forward, about keeping faith with the past and breaking new ground. This festival stands as a sort of watershed in the Christian year: poised between Epiphany and Lent, between Christmas and Holy Week, between the birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus. Tomorrow we will have moved on, with our sights soon to be set on Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

In today's Gospel, we also have a unique image, a picture of Jesus still as the Christ-child; the baby in his mother's arms taken to Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord", as the custom was, and to offer a sacrifice: and that's when Simeon spotted him. Simeon is the central figure of this Gospel, an old and godly man who, years before, had been told he would not die till he'd seen the Messiah with his own eyes. That prophecy is about to be fulfilled, and Simeon recognises at once that Jesus is the one for whom he has been waiting: God's promised Saviour. And being godly and wise, Simeon is able to speak prophetically about who Jesus is:

'a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of God's people Israel' - in other words the Saviour not only of Israel but of the whole world. As a man prophesying in the ancient tradition Simeon looks to the Saviour of Israel - looking back, taking stock - but he does more for he sees that this one is breaking wholly new ground!

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation," he said. The parents were delighted, of course, and so Simeon blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, for Simeon saw something else.

What he saw was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. '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.'

"A sword will pierce through your soul," he said.

In other words, he looks forward to the cross, and to the place Mary will take at its foot, as she sees her Son crucified. He would probably rather have bitten off his tongue rather than said it, but in that holy place he probably felt he had no choice. He handed back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting.

All through this season of Christmas and Epiphany I have been going on and on about the light - the light of Christ. And maybe you're a bit sick of me banging on about it again! But here's the thing. It is this light which Jesus proclaims and embodies that is the very cause of what will be Mary's anguish.

This light comes for "the rise and fall of many in Israel," for as Luke had promised in the Magnificat, the poor will rise to healing and shalom while the rich shall be sent away empty - especially the Pharisees and teachers of the law who will be judged by the cross.

The Light, therefore, is a troublemaker. It will "reveal the inner thoughts of many a heart," exposing their deepest secrets; it blazes into the darkest corners, uncovering what is hidden and unearthing what is buried. It is indeed a two-edged sword, God's Word made human. It will demand that we walk with integrity.

This light, according to the image of our first reading, is like a refiner's fire or a fuller's soap, purifying gold or silver and cleansing freshly woven wool until Israel can present an offering to the Lord in righteousness. The implication is, of course, that Israel was not able to offer anything in righteousness (justice).

In Jesus' time the Temple priesthood had abandoned their integrity and defiled God's house by selling themselves out to the invading Roman principalities and powers. But Christ comes to purify the Temple and to shine integrity upon God's people and their worship in sincerity and truth.

So, Luke stresses that we cannot enjoy the light and warmth of Christ without also welcoming the purification that it brings, a cleansing of the inner clutter of insecurity, lack of focus, deceitfulness, and so on. This inner "de-cluttering and re-focussing" must be undertaken (and the coming season of Lent will give us the opportunity) in order for the Light to do its work in us and our communities.

Today's Feast, then, is about keeping faith and breaking ground, about maintaining and conserving what has been handed on to us and also about moving forward to include what has never before been thought of.

We can't see the future as Simeon did. But this doesn't stop us trying to predict and project. Some cynics will tell us that the Anglican Communion doesn't really have a future - that it has had its day, that it's been so busy being inclusive that its most loyal followers have lost faith with it. Churchgoing statistics certainly make depressing reading. But we mustn't forget that that's just one kind of future; a human way of looking at things, and that God sees differently.

There is much talk of mission in the church at the moment - rightly so. But we need to be clear that - as the former Dean of both Adelaide and Melbourne, David Richardson put it: "it is not that the church of God has a mission to the world but, rather, it is the God of mission who has a church in the world."

The future is God's future, and where St. Andrew's goes as a parish is God's doing. What God asks of us is that we be open to the movement of the Spirit, so that God's work might be done in this place. So, until later this year, Merry Christmas to you all - and may we work together to make God's Glory and light known in this place.

In the name of God. Amen.