

Talk Candlemas 2021

Gospel reading: Luke 2: 22-40

Introduction

Candlemas – or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – marks a pivotal point in our church year as we read about Mary and Joseph following Jewish tradition and taking their baby to the Temple to present him there. One of the major themes of Candlemas is light, but there are other themes which weave through and overlap and which we'll be looking at a bit later.

Also known as Feast of Candles, when candles for the coming church year were blessed during the service. As a mark of this, you might like to have a lit candle before you.

One thing to remember is that the occasion we celebrate was bittersweet: in our Gospel reading we look back to the celebration of Christ's birth, but also we look forward to his passion. And the figures of Simeon and Anna are the vehicles that help us to do this. These figures are beautiful soulful ones – appealing in their wisdom and deep deep faith. The Presentation of Christ is a lyrical feast – one rich in symbolism and metaphorical meaning. I hope you will find that it resonates with you

Sermon

I thought that today we would have some visual aids to help us with our thoughts – I've added some images of icons of this scene to the order of service. These will be aids but not the focus of my talk. It's hardly surprising that this episode was often depicted in icons – it is so full of symbols pointing to insights and truths. I hope you keep these images and look at them from time to time.

As I was preparing, it came to me that we have two cameos here in this reading and in the icons – small pictures of two couples who bring together all the symbolism and implications of this event of the presentation of Christ to the Temple.

The first cameo is of Mary and Joseph, faithful to the laws of their people and coming to the Temple for two reasons set out by their faith tradition: so that Mary could be purified after childbirth; and for the redemption of their first-born, for whom they were bound to offer a sacrifice – of a lamb

if they were rich, and of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons if they were poor.

Mary and Joseph bring with them the offering of the poor as they make their way through the portals and colonnades of the Temple with its canopy covering the altar of sacrifice.

They make their way with two turtle doves or pigeons, carried by Joseph, with Mary carrying the baby, who was to become the very real sacrifice later on.

So already we have this theme of looking back to the ways of the Jewish tradition but forward to the new way that Jesus was to bring. Our Eucharistic Prayer later on will state: "his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross." Through Jesus, no more lambs nor doves nor pigeons would be needed, no more distinctions between rich or poor would be obvious, all would be brought right with God through him.

With this cameo of Mary and Joseph we are introduced to the theme of time too. Not only looking back in time to the Jewish ways and forward to the new way through Christ, but also the idea that birth is an ending and a beginning – the ending of Mary's time of pregnancy, of 'bearing' of the Christ child, but the beginning of Jesus' lifetime, and of what is to become his special nature and his mission. We are told that "the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him."

And then of course the theme of pain to come – Mary is told directly that a sword will pierce her own soul. Again we look forward in time to the Cross, to Mary sitting at the foot of the Cross as Jesus is dying.

Maybe only Mary heard this prediction for the future – there is no indication in the Bible passage that Joseph has heard and we know that he is not mentioned as being present at the crucifixion. Tradition tells us that he was much older than Mary and had already died by then. Mary had a lot to bear alone – physically bearing Jesus during the pregnancy, then carrying him as they present him to the Temple, then bearing the pain and grief of his death later on. So here another theme – that of bearing and carrying, brought out through this picture of Mary.

Finally, this cameo of Mary and Joseph points to the theme of faithfulness – they have been faithful to God, they have been faithful to their religious tradition and they remain faithful to the dramatic destiny of their child, hinted at here, but which was to work itself out in Jesus'

own faithfulness to his Father and the calling he perceives as he grows and matures.

The second cameo is of Simeon and Anna. Here we see reflections of the same themes – time, beginning and ending, looking backwards and looking forwards. Both Simeon and Anna are near the end of their lives but are seeing a new beginning for the future in this baby. Simeon takes the baby Mary bears and, recognizing the light and glory he represents, offers him to God and to humankind for the future.

Faithfulness – both Simeon and Anna are people of deep faith, of profound wisdom, prophets, people who have dedicated their lives to God, constantly in the Temple, constantly in prayer. So close are they to the heart of God that they ‘see’ more in this ritual than anyone else present. They are real prophets in that sense, real bearers of the reality of God in the world, real messengers of the divine.

I read in one commentary that Simeon is an old man carrying a vast hope. What a beautiful way of putting it. Simeon has been waiting for this day, watching out for signs of it for many years and here his hope is fulfilled in the Temple on this day. (see icon of Simeon alone)

Simeon knows he can now die in peace, he has seen and done all that God had prepared for him. But he is also the one to tell Mary of the pain she will go through – he is the messenger of great hope and joy, but also the messenger of great pain.

Maybe Simeon represents the reality of the life of faith, he reminds us of its shadow side, of its bittersweet nature, of how we must strive for the hope to always overcome the pain. For that is maybe the overriding message that Jesus was to embody – hope overcoming pain.

And Anna – old too, but wise, with the experience of a full life behind her; since the death of her husband she has completely devoted her life to God and now is so in tune with His purposes that she too ‘sees’ this special child “and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna too has the moment of insight into the extraordinary destiny of this child, connecting him immediately to the old way of the Jewish tradition and to the new future which lay ahead.

So the cameo of Simeon and Anna – raising the hopes of all present and also the hopes of all those to come.

Cameos of Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna – balancing the old and the new, the past and the future, the hope and the pain. The images on the icons reflect all that with the two couple on either side, with the baby just off- centre and the altar of sacrifice with its canopy right in the centre. Past and future meet right there through this child now being offered.

I hope you will look at them from time to time and remember the riches of this feast of Candlemas, its profound themes and the light and insights it offers to us today. Amen.

A way for us to respond – The same Holy Spirit that moved in the midst of this encounter – resting on Simeon – resting on us now.. as we offer up to God the bittersweet of our lives – our experiences of youth and aging, looking back and looking forward, old and new traditions, bearing pain and hope, fear and trust – bringing it all to God as if placing them on the altar before we share in a spiritual act of Communion.