

Epiphany 4: The Child Jesus in the Temple

Ezekiel 43:27-44:4

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 2:22-40

The encounter reported in today's gospel is about ends and beginning – and ends again. It is an end for both Simeon and Anna who have looked for this day for many years; Luke the gospel writer tells us that it had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

It is a beginning for Mary, Joseph and Jesus as they offer their new baby in the temple, following the commandments of the Jewish law; but it looks forward to another end in the death of Jesus – in the words of Simeon, 'This child is destined for the falling and 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.'

We understand these words very well, but Mary may not have done at the time.

But let us go back to Simeon and Anna. For them it is the culmination of their lives, lives lived faithfully with God. It inspired, in Simeon, words which have become a Christian classic.

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

2 For mine eyes have seen
thy salvation;

3 Which thou hast prepared
before the face of all people;

4 To be a light to lighten the Gentiles
and to be the glory of thy people Israel

For centuries these words have been prayed by Christians at the end of each day in Compline or Evening Prayer; but also at the end of life at the time of death or as part of the funeral service. That sense of peace, of fulfillment is how we all might want to face death. We might want to do

it because there is usually very little choice about death and a peaceful death is more bearable for those who die: more importantly it is more bearable for those who watch and live on.

The reason that Simeon faced his own death with such equanimity was that he had achieved all he had wanted and he had seen all of God's promises fulfilled. And of course he had seen God's promises fulfilled because he had waited patiently in the Temple to see the Messiah. His peace is in part a gift from God and in part of his own making.

How do we achieve a peaceful death, a joyful death, a good death? Perhaps there are two things we might take from today's readings. One is that we work to do in our lives all that God wants us to do. For most of us our achievement will not be about fame or wealth. It will be about making a difference in our own community, in our families, in the church we are all part of.

The second clue lies in the second reading, from St Paul. He makes quite an extraordinary claim: in effect he says that nothing we can do is of any value unless it is motivated by love. In a world focused on achievement this is truly fighting against the trend. It is certainly fighting the received wisdom in schools where for many years the focus has been on exam results. Paul says it does not matter whether you get ten top grade GCSEs if you do not love your neighbour. That has not been the view of Ofsted or the Department of Education.

What is wonderful about this doctrine is that it is so egalitarian. I don't think anyone here is or will be a James Dyson; or a Richard Branson or a Jonathan or Alistair Brownlee or even a Michael Jackson. But every one of us can show love to our fellow human beings. A life lived with love is more likely to lead to a peaceful and joyful death.

Loving other people is, in many ways, enlightened self interest. If I hate other people and abuse them it will probably come back to me in some way. And if I love others the same will happen. I see it almost every week. Often someone will comment on how kind other people have been to them: I want to reply, 'Yes. That is partly because you have always been generous to them.'

But there is a harder edge to it. Love is commanded by God speaking both through the reading we have just heard from St Paul and also through Jesus:

A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.

John 13:34

Simeon and Anna were present in the Temple through obedience to God; we must love one another in obedience to God. And the bottom line is at if we fail to do this we will have to answer for it to God himself.

So much for Simeon and Anna. Let us return to Joseph and Mary who are at the centre of this event. They, too, were present in the Temple in obedience to God.

This was a specific commandment, not just for Mary and Joseph but for all Jews, set out in Exodus 13. It was, to us, a rather curious arrangement. They were to offer to the Lord the first-born of every creature – whether of their farm animals or their own children. In the case of Samuel, he was left in the Temple to serve with the priest Eli. But in general the child was offered symbolically and then bought back with an offering according to what the parents could afford – in the case of Mary and Joseph a pair of turtle doves.

The reason given for this was that it was an act of thanksgiving for God rescuing the Jews from slavery in Egypt; and a recognition that the Egyptians paid for their disobedience by losing their own first born sons.

It is not a natural way of thinking for us. But what lies at the heart of it all is very natural – giving thanks. Giving thanks is an act of politeness but it goes far beyond that. Giving thanks is a recognition that I am not self reliant, that I need, that I am dependent on others; above all that I am dependent on God.

For Mary and Joseph it was expressed in a ritual, the offering of two pigeons in the Temple. We too have a ritual – the Offertory in the Parish

Mass. When the people present the bread and wine at the altar, the priest prays, sometimes aloud and sometimes quietly

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation:
Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
Fruit of the earth and work of human hands
it will become for us the bread of life.

The key bit is 'through your goodness we have this bread to offer'. The idea that what we have is only because of God's generosity is one that runs deeply through Jewish and Christian spirituality. For example, when King David gathered the gifts of the people for the construction of the temple, he spoke this prayer:

Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty... For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

1 Chronicles 29:11, 15

This belief lies at the heart of our attitude to money and to giving. Occasionally people tell me how generous some other person is with his or her money as if such generosity were extraordinary. I often want to reply, and sometimes do reply, 'Yes, that is simply how Christians are'

So here, in a simple story about a baby and a religious ritual we have so much of the gospel message. And such a simple message. We are called to be generous: generous to God and generous to our neighbour; generous with our love and generous with our money. And we are generous because God was generous first.

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