

## **The Presentation of the Lord**

**Observed 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015**

**Sermon preached at St George's Malvern by Fr John Stewart**

Keeping up with the stories of these weeks since Christmas is a bit of a challenge, is it not? On Christmas Day we celebrated and welcomed Christ being born in us. Then Mary and Joseph took the new baby to Egypt to avoid the death sentence of Herod on all baby boys. Then at 8 days he was circumcised according to the requirements of the Jewish law. Then as an adult he entered the ritual washing ceremony in the Jordan River and went off on a wilderness retreat to think about the meaning of life. Then we have had a couple of weeks where the adult Jesus has been calling people to follow him. Now he is 40 days old and being brought to the great Temple in Jerusalem. Though actually the festival we observe today is really meant to be tomorrow!

This story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is a story about endings and beginnings and the importance of our spiritual practices. Endings because it brings to an end the 40 day celebration of Christmas. Though I'll bet you put your tree and decorations away weeks ago – who waits until the 40<sup>th</sup> day? But it's really about more important endings. Remember the old man Simeon who features in this story. He is a devout old man filled with the Holy Spirit and assured by the Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Christ, the Messiah, the one Jews had been longing for for centuries. Simeon happens to be at the Temple as Mary and Joseph arrive with their six week old baby. In an inspired song Simeon, fondly cradling the baby, declares Jesus to be the one his people had been longing for.

This moment brings to an end the centuries of waiting. And it brings to an end the spiritual practices associated with sacrificing animals at the Temple. From now on we will think about God not physically living in a Temple and requiring sacrifices – we will think about God dwelling in each of us and longing for our love in return for his loving us. In the final prayer we say at the end of the Eucharist we say "Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice."

It also brings to an end the idea that the people of Israel were God's chosen people – that God had a special relationship with them to the exclusion of all other peoples. Now God is the God of all people and every tribe and nation. Christ, coming into the world and being presented to God is a light to lighten all peoples.

Simeon speaks wonderfully of the child's future, blesses the parents and alerts Mary to the suffering she and her son will face.

There's another senior citizen present, a devout prophetess called Anna. She has spent her life in the temple area in prayer and fasting, and she gives thanks to God and she witnesses about this child to all who have kept alive hope for the redemption of Jerusalem.

These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfilment

of God's promises. And they are old, ready to move offstage, to depart in peace. God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping an old promise.

The story concludes for now. The law has been fully kept. Mary and Joseph return with Jesus to their home in Nazareth of Galilee and the child grows in strength, wisdom and divine favour. We are left in anticipation but without a clue as to what comes next.

What comes next is, when you think about it, entirely up to us. In that event some things are brought to their end and others begin. Religious practices are transformed and renewed. And questions become clearer. In this story Jesus is presented in the temple and wise, prayerful people see and understand. They see deeply what is going on and they speak about what they see. This is the one. Our time of waiting is over. New light is dawning in our dark world. God is now present in human form. In this Jesus the Christ. And in us, the members of the body of Christ.

So, dear Simeons and Annas, who is the Christ we are presenting to the world? To our families, neighbours and friends? Is the Christ we present detached, remote, not involved or caring about our lives? Is our Christ like a sort of divine Panadol – only reached for when we are in need? Is Christ grumpy and judgmental, basically against everything we think and do and keeping score of our actions? Is our Christ one who agrees with our political choices, ethical decisions, daily habits – like a projection of ourselves? Or does he critique, call into question what we do – inviting us to be more than we are, to grow and change, to work for justice and peace? Does our Christ have a view about refugees, the poor, the rich, women, gays, Muslims, the desperate, the chronically ill, the death penalty, the manipulating powerful, the ego driven leaders?

Who is the Christ we are presenting to the world? Who is the Christ we are presenting in this parish community of St George's? Like every week, we have to face up to the stories which shape and encourage and challenge us. These stories, today's story among them, these are not simply history – nice stories about long ago. They are about us. Which person do you identify yourself with in this story. Are you an old churchgoer who finally sees what you have been waiting all your life to see? If so, like Simeon and Anna you have a story to share. Are you the dutiful parents doing what is required of them and bringing their baby to offer him to God? There is a sense we can be all of these characters. And also, we have to see that we are the Christ who is presented. Just as Jesus embodied the Spirit of Christ at the time in history, so we do now.

"We are the body of Christ – his spirit is in us" is what we affirm Sunday by Sunday.

Today as we present our selves to God, and then when we leave we present our selves to God's world, we do so affirming that we are growing into the likeness of Christ, that God is at work in us and with us. We are co-operating with God in God's work in the world. We don't pray for peace and justice and love – we are to be peace and justice and love.