

A Sermon preached on The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemass) by the Very Revd David Richardson OBE Ch St J *Dean Emeritus of Melbourne and Provincial Canon of Canterbury, and until recently the Abp of Canterbury's Envoy to the Holy See.*

It was also the occasion of the commissioning of the members of the Vestry.

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Today is the last opportunity until December for any of us to wish each other a happy Christmas for Candlemass or, to give it its full name, 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 miracles, and now we look back 30 years to the time when Mary and Joseph took him to be presented (or offered) to God in the Temple.

Candlemass 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, all signs of Christmas will be gone, the white and gold vestments carefully folded away and 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 watershed, 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 old Simeon spotted him. Though the prophet Anna's contribution is significant – her prophesy describes Jesus in sacrificial language in terms of "redemption" but we don't hear her exact words – Simeon is the central figure of the Candlemass Gospel, an old and godly man who, years before, had been told he wouldn't die till he'd seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and time, frankly, was running out. When the moment finally came, one look through his cataract lenses was all it took. He asked of he might hold the baby. 'Sure, but mind you don't drop him' was the response.

Simeon recognises at once that Jesus is the one he has been waiting for: 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, while the baby played with the fringes of his beard. The parents were pleased as punch, of course, and so he 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.

Simeon sees things as they are, and also things as they will become. The transforming power of Christ is foreshadowed in this story and we see the seeds of the end of the Temple cult. Previously, the story is telling us, people had to go to the Temple to be purified, to become acceptable to God. But now, Jesus will change all that. "My eyes," says Simeon, "have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." In other words, Jesus is for all people, both Jew and Gentile; and so the cult no longer stands.

But why, in that case, is today's gospel coupled with that reading from Malachi? "And he shall purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." Why, if the Gospel reading is about how the temple cult is ended by Jesus, are we also warned that his light will be like a refiner's fire? If the cult no longer stands, surely the refiner's fire has been extinguished?

But it doesn't work quite like that, not so neatly, as we learn from the subsequent verses of Malachi. "I will be swift to bear witness against the adulterers, the sorcerers ... against those who oppress the hired workers ... the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts."

The book of Malachi was written, probably, in about 480 BC, when the temple was being restored after the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. That's also the time when the third section of the book of Isaiah was being written; and when Ezra and Nehemiah were re-establishing the Temple in Jerusalem, with all the legalism and imposed notions of purity, which that implied.

And inevitably at such a time there was a row going on and, this being religion, the row was about exclusiveness versus inclusiveness, about who should be in, and who should be out. Who was acceptable to the

Lord, and who wasn't. On the inclusive side were Malachi and Isaiah, on the exclusive side, Ezra and Nehemiah.

I refer you, for evidence, to Ezra chapter 10 verse 10; "You have trespassed and married foreign women ... now make confession to the Lord ... and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the foreign wives." Not much inclusion there, then. And on the other side, Isaiah 56:6 – "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer."

What's being said by those who favour inclusion, a big, messy Church, is that God desires mercy, and not sacrifice; that we are called to allow justice to roll down like an ever-rolling stream; that, as Malachi says, we must not be those who oppress the widow, the orphan and the alien.

And why is this relevant to today? No, I'm not going to speak about boats. It's relevant today because today is Candlemass and is about keeping faith and breaking ground, about maintaining and conserving what has been handed on to us and 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: in Australia fewer than one in seven who claim to be Christian regularly attend a Church. So is the future a church in terminal decline? That's a rather depressing thought, especially if you're being commissioned for an office in the Church. But we mustn't forget that that's just one kind of future, and that that particular future is not inevitable. There is a real danger in looking at the future through fatalistic spectacles.

What Simeon saw was effectively God's future: the future that God was to bring about through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God's future is not something that just happens like Topsy, in a fatalistic sense, but something that is built - with God as the master-builder and we as God's co-workers. As it says in Psalm 127:

*Unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labour in vain.*

Today witnesses the commissioning of new vestry members. Their work – and anything else that happens in the church – is God's doing, and not ours. There is much talk of mission in the church at the moment – rightly so in a country in which a very large number of people have no contact whatsoever with the Church. But we need to be clear that 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 George's goes as a parish is God's doing. What God asks of us is that, like Simeon, we open ourselves completely to him so that the Holy Spirit might work through us. Then, like Simeon, we shall be able to look back and see where we've come from – recognise the significance of what's going on now in the present – and look forward to where we might go in the future. This is a Holy Spirit thing. The progress of the church is not something we can engineer in our own right but can achieve only by God working within us.

- ❖ Finally, to return to Simeon: he could have easily contented himself with gazing in wonder at the infant Jesus and saying nothing but positive things. But he didn't - he also looked forward. And what he saw was a future that was troubled, but which ultimately saw God's purpose worked out through the death and resurrection of Jesus. My prayer for you new vestry members, for this parish and for all of us called by the name of Christ is
- ❖ that as Simeon did we might have the eyes and faith to recognize God's redemption in unlikely bodies, strange places
- ❖ that we might have the eyes to see God's redeeming work in the world around us, and the faith to proclaim it,
- ❖ that increasingly we might become people who can recognize God's unfolding redemption, and respond as Simeon did.

David Richardson 2 February 2014