

Now made known

2 2 14

Almighty and ever-living God,
clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son
was this day presented in the Temple,
in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you,
with pure and clean hearts
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our text today may be found in Luke chapter 2 and verse 39:

Anna spoke 'about the child to all who were looking
for the redemption of Jerusalem.'

Today, February 2nd, is Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Three titles for the same day, forty days on from Christmas Day. It marks the end of the season of Christmas and Epiphany and marks the moment when we begin to turn our attention away from the joy of the Incarnation and knowing God anew to looking on towards Ash Wednesday, the forty days of Lent and Jesus' Crucifixion.

Why have Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem just forty days after his birth? The answer is to be found in the Torah,

the Jewish Law, in Leviticus 12 verses 2 to 4, words which in the 21st century to our Western Christian ears sound curiously alien: 'If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are complete.' Forty days thereafter, she should bring to the priest a sacrifice – a pigeon or turtle dove as a sin-offering (v6). Mary and Joseph and Jesus are there, therefore, because they are good Jews, religious Jews, acting in accordance with the Jewish practice of the time.

There in the Temple, they meet, among others unnamed or unmentioned, two very special people – Simeon and Anna. Simeon, I guess, will be well known to you through the words of the Nunc Dimittis, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . .' Anna is probably less well known but no less important on this occasion because both bear witness to the fact that this child, Jesus, is a special child. In Judaism, you need more than one witness to confirm the truth of what is said.

Simeon is an old man, a devout and righteous man, who is 'looking forward to the consolation of Israel' – coded language like the words of our text today for the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom. Simeon is inspired and informed by the presence of the Holy Spirit with him. He has been promised that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah with his own eyes. He does. Taking the child in his arms, he prophesies, recognising that Jesus is the Messiah.

Handing the baby back, Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph and shares with them the awful truth that their son, Jesus, will be good news for some but bad news for others. Even Mary herself will suffer because of her love for her son – ‘a sword shall pierce your own soul too.’ Now, Simeon can die in peace – his wish has been fulfilled.

Anna is an 84-year-old widow who spends all her time in the Temple in prayer and fasting. We know her father’s name – Phanuel – and that she was of the tribe of Asher. She was married for seven years before her husband died. At that very moment that Simeon was holding Jesus in his arms and speaking to Mary and Joseph, Anna came then praised God for what she saw and heard and understood. That knowledge she went off and shared, not with everyone but with other folk who like her ‘were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’

And one last point before I end – the final verse of today’s gospel reading: ‘The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom: and the favour of the Lord was upon him.’ I’ve said before and I’ll say it again how frustrating it is that we know so little about Jesus’ childhood, his life growing up in Nazareth, what he was like as a young man. This is Luke’s summary of what Mary told him and that is all we have to content ourselves with until at the age of twelve when we briefly read about his visit to the Temple and the parallel sentence: ‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.’ (2v52)

Today then, as we turn towards Ash Wednesday and Lent, let us remember with thanks the fact that God has made himself known to us in the person of his Son,

Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and that through knowing him, we can be renewed, we can start anew, new in the knowledge that God knows us and loves us and has brought us home.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 29 : Now made known

