

I've been asked a couple of times in the last week if I ever use old sermons. Absolutely not, I said ... well, except once in a while when there is something I've landed on which seems to me to go to the heart of what my own faith and calling is all about. Something which has resonated so strongly with how God has led me through my life, that I bring myself to the text, and the hopefully together we have something to say which characterises the journey I've been on ... and which we've been sharing together for these last thirteen years.

Candlemas is one of those occasions. There is something going on in today's festival, and in the gospel passage in particular, which resonates so deeply within me - and I believe for us in a Cathedral, that I'm going to repeat some of what I will have said here when I've preached on this time before. *This festival captures the heart of why we do, what we do here in the Cathedral.* It describes people at every stage of life, infancy, early parenthood, old age, obediently following the traditions of their faith, and discovering God meeting them powerfully *through* those traditions.

Let's recap the gospel story. Mary and Joseph are devout Jewish parents, committed to following the disciplines of the Jewish faith. Luke has helped us understand this, by explaining that they were following the law of the Lord, prayers for the mother, and the dedication of a first born son, recorded, respectively, in Leviticus chapter 12 and Exodus chapter 13. The designated sacrifice was a lamb and a pigeon for a wealthy family, or alternatively two young pigeons or doves for a poorer family. The sacrifice was to demonstrate the priority of God in their lives at this time of receiving God's blessing of a child.

So, Mary and Joseph travel to Jerusalem. The regulations prescribe forty days after the birth - perhaps they had stayed on in Bethlehem, which was nearer to Jerusalem than Nazareth. We don't know how the timing of this event fits with the visit of the Magi, which we have been remembering during Epiphany, or the flight to Egypt - although that perhaps would have been later, the assumption being that the wise men saw the star at Jesus birth and only then prepared to set out to find him. So there's several sub plots going on, all reflecting this season of Epiphany, when we are thinking about Jesus being revealed as the Son of God in the world. (Sadly we have sidestepped the turning of water into wine - another of my favourite passages, with its message that we do what we are told to do, and God does the rest.)

Today, we are thinking about Jesus being revealed in the Temple, to those who were ready to see him - and that's the key! Jesus is brought into the temple by his parents. It's a busy place, full of bustle, of moneychangers exchanging the regular currency for the temple currency for pilgrims to buy sacrifices, of sacrifices being offered, of people just meeting one another, of soldiers ... of tourists, in all probability. It's the place to be, the place to meet - the place to meet one another, the place to meet God. Just like Cathedrals today.

In this place, waiting for Mary and Joseph, and more importantly for the baby they carry - though they did not know it - are two faithful servants of God, Simeon and Anna. I have been helped so much over the years in my response to this passage by my Interpretation Bible commentary on Luke, and by a sermon I heard by a student preacher who I was supposed to be supervising, but from whom I learned so much.

Simeon and Anna, my commentary explains, 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." Despite their age, they are like a dance to a piece of jazz, so rooted in the pattern of the music that they are able to riff around it as they spot a new theme or a new rhythm. They are the exact opposite of people stuck in tradition, they are so at ease with it that to becomes a springboard for growth.

This is what the Cathedral offers, in its daily weekly, yearly rhythm of prayer and worship. Drawing deeply each day from scripture and sacrament, we become used to being attentive to God, laying our lives and our world before him each day, crying out for his grace and mercy. It's true that a

place like this can take our eyes off God if we are not careful, as we become more concerned with *how* things are done than *what* is being done - the notes are *less* important than what is being sung, the words of the prayers are *less* important than what is being prayed from the heart. This is a place to practice attentiveness to God, and the familiarity of what is said and done is there to free us to give our *whole* attention, the attention of our bodies, minds, heart and soul to God. And this is what Simeon and Anna have done: longing for the consolation of Israel, God's redemption made present in the middle of a world in chaos, with lost leaders and a foreign occupation.

We heard in our clergy teaching day on Thursday how a new generation are turning to religious faith, coming to churches and cathedrals and buying bibles like never before. They are looking for consolation in times of chaos. Our speaker started the day by asking us if we'd read the news, saying how fabulous it was. I confess that was a bad moment for me, from which I never really recovered: the news is unbelievably awful. But it can drive us to God - and the result of that, as she was saying, is that people are turning to God, and God is meeting them in the midst of the great traditions of faith, places where we can rediscover the ancient paths God calls us to walk in. As my commentary says, "too much Christian preaching turns its back on the temple and its ritual life, and apparently without pain, as though God had experienced a change of mind."

So, Simeon has been faithful in his worship, and somehow God has given him the conviction that he will live to see God's salvation. Prompted by the Spirit that morning, he comes into the temple, and sees Mary and Joseph coming towards him, asking if he will offer the traditional prayer of thanksgiving for the birth of a child. And they put Jesus in his hands.

On Christmas Day, you may remember that Bishop Sophie reminded you that everyone in this Cathedral is invited to step into the tradition of this place, to come forward at communion and hold out your hands, and one of us will put Jesus into your hands, in the bread and wine.

When Simeon takes Jesus, something incredible happens. He knows who this is. This is the best thing that has ever happened to him. This makes sense of his life. And this is one of the things I love: the very best thing in the history of the world has happened to him, and he comes out with the *Nunc Dimmitis!* Who knew Simeon was a traditional Anglican? We associate these words, known to many of us by their opening words in Latin, with Anglican evensong, *the* most traditional service of them all. And the comfort of these familiar words, with their resonance of a summer evening in the Anglican countryside. But that's not how they come across here at all: my friend Mark who preached that student sermon all those years ago took with him into the pulpit a painting of an old man with his head thrown back in sheer joy, and he used the words that have stayed with me ever since: "a lifetime of waiting *exploded* in a roar of joy". "Now, you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word. My eyes have seen your salvation ..." It is an electric moment. And it's what this cathedral is for - to prepare the ground for God to meet us and catch us up in what God is doing not just 2000 years ago but right here, right now (fatboy slim at the ready - the *Nunc Dimmits* to a fatboy slim backing track anyone?)

However, lest we get carried away in to an easy triumph, we need to remember that this feast of Candlemas is beautiful, but also bittersweet. Simeon blesses Mary, and Joseph, and warns them that the way ahead will not be easy, as Jesus confronts those in power, revealing their true motivation ... and the result of that will be hard for his mother to bear. I'm thrilled that so many people, especially younger men, are discovering Jesus in the traditional services and scriptures of the church. But I'm anxious when that becomes associated with traditional views of men, especially, and power, and especially where it becomes a way of strengthening a form of pseudo Christian nationalism which endangers the lives of the poor and marginalised. Tradition is there to help us keep attentive to Jesus in our midst, and when what are called 'traditional values' take the place of Jesus' values, we need to call it out. Jesus came to confront power, not to bolster it.

The other person who was there in the temple everyday was Christine ... well actually, I mean Anna, but I always think of little Christine who was part of this community for so many years, tidying the hassocks and telling me off when she didn't like what I was doing. In recent weeks and months we have again been walking alongside many faithful members of this Cathedral community

who have been going through sickness, and too many of whom have been called to glory. But this is life - and places like this outlast any of us individuals who play our part for a time. But it doesn't make it easy.

Next week, extraordinarily, Su and I will be in Jerusalem and I will be preaching in St. George's Cathedral, as we take them a cross of nails. We may get the chance to visit the remains of the temple, following in the footsteps of Mary and Joseph. It's a bit of a full circle for me, as I was in Jerusalem - well, Nazareth actually - when I heard I had been shortlisted for this job. Today, the land of Israel Palestine is even more broken apart and hurting than it was then, and we remember Jesus coming to the temple not just as a baby unrecognised by most, but later as a saviour - also unrecognised and unreceived by most. The privilege of going there to share from our Coventry experience of Jesus meeting us in the midst of devastation and bringing hope and new life is immense. Please pray for us as we go, as we remember on this Candlemas that Jesus came not just as a baby, but also as a saviour, the consolation of the world, and be ready to worship him.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*