

Presentation of Christ in the Temple 2021

Luke 2:22-40

Today we particularly remember the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. This is a very ancient tradition in the church, and it is sometimes also known as Candlemas because traditionally Christians would bring the candles that they would use all year to the church to be blessed and then those candles would serve to remind them that Jesus is the light of the world.

It is not surprising that we find this story in the Gospel of Luke. Each of the Gospel writers emphasised a different aspect and revealed different characteristics of the person of Jesus. The emphasis in Matthew is on the Kingdom of God with Jesus as its Royal King, Mark reveals Jesus as the suffering Servant of God, John focuses on Jesus as the Holy Son of God and His divine majesty, but for Luke, as well as being the Messiah, Jesus is the perfect human being, and he presents us with much more of the humanity of Jesus.

In Luke we find more about Jesus childhood and family life than we do in the other Gospels and the Nativity narrative in Luke is told very much more from Mary, Jesus's mother's perspective. In the story of Jesus's Presentation at the Temple we learn a lot. This is a devout family who are observing everything that is required under the law of Moses. After 40 days Mary must come to be purified after childbirth and the child must be presented and a sacrificial sin offering made. We learn that the family is relatively poor because normally the offering would be a lamb and a pigeon, but two pigeons or doves would suffice if that were all a family could afford. Every firstborn son was dedicated to God but could be redeemed for 5 shekels. We are not told that Jesus was redeemed so, like Samuel, His life remained dedicated to the Lord.

We have already had witnesses to His Kingship, Angels, Shepherds worshipped at His birth and later came Magi led by a star. Now the Prophet

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and Prophetess Simeon and Anna add their testimony, but they speak of Him as a child who will grow up to be a man. Both have waited patiently for many years for God to fulfil His promise to these faithful servants that they would see the Lord's Messiah. Simeon is clearly a man of God who is used to responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and at the Spirit's prompting he goes to the Temple Courts to find Joseph and Mary. Taking Jesus in His arms he praises God and speaks the familiar words that we now refer to as the Nunc Dimittis (now you dismiss in Latin). "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." What an incredible prophetic word. Just as with the inclusion of the Magi, God is again saying that the salvation that Jesus will bring will be for all peoples, a light to the Gentiles, as well as for the Jews. But the prophecy contains warning as well. Jesus will be a sign that will be spoken against. The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. It has always been the case that even as many turn to Jesus and bow down to Him as their Lord and King, there continue to be many who reject him and turn away. Finally, Simeon has a word for Mary, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too". There has been joy and wonder at her son's birth, but she will also have to watch her firstborn suffer horrifically and die on a cross.

Then Anna comes forward, another faithful servant of God who has lived at the temple, worshipping, fasting, and praying day and night for around 60 years. On seeing the infant Jesus, she too thanks God and proceeds to tell all those who were there, who were waiting for the Messiah, about this child.

After doing all that was required, Mary and Joseph took Jesus home to Nazareth, and He grew strong, was filled with wisdom and the grace of God

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was on Him. A perfect whole human being, living and experiencing all the human joys and sorrows of family life and living in a community.

I just want to say a little more about Simeon and Anna. Two seemingly minor characters in many ways, warranting just a few brief sentences in the story of Jesus's life. But these were incredible, faithful saints. We know from later on in Jesus life that by no means all of the religious people of the time were truly Godly people. Many were puffed up with pride and drunk on power as they burdened the ordinary people with all kinds of expectations. Many were hypocrites not practicing in any way what they preached. Of course, that was not true of all of them, Nicodemus for example was a true disciple of Jesus and of course there would have been others. But overall, it seems that the religious hierarchy was pretty corrupt and rotten. But here were these two humble servants of God, who were longing to see the coming of the promised Messiah and willing to wait uncomplainingly for the Father's timing. As old as he was, Simeon did not doubt God's promise that he would not die before seeing the chosen one. It is hard to wait for many years for something that you believe God is going to do, seeing things deteriorate around you and with no sign of when or if God will keep His word. But Simeon didn't waiver. And Anna, just lived to serve and worship, that was her whole life, assuming she was in her early to mid-twenties when her husband died, she had been doing just that within the Temple for around 60 years! Wow! Thinking about Simeon and Anna reminded me of an excellent book by Eugene Peterson called, 'A Long Obedience in the Same Direction'. It is well worth reading. Interestingly the expression was coined by the atheist Nietzsche. The full quote is: 'The essential thing in heaven and in earth

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is.....that there should be long obedience in the same direction, there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made a life worth living'. That is an incredible insight, and it is something that Peterson says that the world around us today discourages. I suspect it always has. Simeon and Anna lived lives that personified a long obedience in the same direction, and I am sure they would say that it made their lives worth living. Simeon and Anna are wonderful role models for us. That kind of discipleship, obedience to God, following Jesus, staying faithful and committed day in day out, year in year out, through the highs and lows, the joys and the heartaches, that surely does make a life worth living.