

Sermon.2025.02.02: Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Today the readings are for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ, or – as it's called in the old Book of Common Prayer - the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Traditionally it's also called Candlemas, because the candles that were lit for Christmas and Epiphany were lit once again today – and a lot of candles makes a lot of sense at this time of the year in Northern Europe; but a lot less sense for mid-summer in Australia. So let's not worry too much about the Candlemas side of things – but the interesting question is: is this festival about some sort of 'purification' needed after childbirth? – something we instinctively recoil from nowadays as something inherently sexist and demeaning of women. Or is it about the firstborn son of Mary being presented in the Temple and dedicated to a life of service to God? – something that seems to be an old Hebrew custom, at least since the time of the prophet Samuel, who was dedicated in this way by his mother Hannah. The old prayerbook – following mediaeval custom - seems to suggest the former (a purification after childbirth); the new prayerbook, in which it's called the feast of the Presentation, seems to suggest the latter (a dedication of the child). And to be honest, the reading on which the festival is based from Luke's Gospel, which we've heard today, also seems to have more of a focus on Jesus as a new-born child than on his mother. This is because of the affirmations he receives from both Simeon and Anna. Simeon recites what's come to be known as the *nunc dimittis*, a passage I remember having to

learn by heart as a child, so it's stuck with me in this version (and I'm quite glad I had to learn it by heart, by the way):

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

This is a fixed part of the old service of Evensong, and I remember hearing from an old lady (whose name I've forgotten, unfortunately) who used to sing in the choir at the English Church in Berlin talking about the time when the newly installed German chancellor, a certain Adolf Hitler, had decided to visit for Evensong, and they'd all felt rather nervous about singing this particular canticle – because Herr Hitler's attitude to the people of Israel was pretty well known. Well they sang it anyway – and history doesn't record the reaction of the eminent visitor. Anyway – that was me going off on a bit of tangent.

The point is, that the Christ child is acclaimed in today's gospel by both Simeon and the prophet Anna as the one who was to be sent for the deliverance of the chosen people. The focus is very much on the presentation of the Christ child. Though Mary is mentioned as the one whom Simeon speaks: '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 rather ominous prediction to Mary about the future pain that being this child’s mother is going to entail.

There’s a certain universality about this prediction of course – we all worry about our children, and I suspect we never stop worrying about them no matter how old they are or how old we are. But Simeon’s words are also very specific: ‘*This child...*’ will confront people and demand they search their own hearts and examine their innermost thoughts and intentions: some, in fact many, will fall at this hurdle, but others will rise. Those who fall, and maybe at times even those who rise, will oppose – and for you also, Mary, this will feel like a sword through your own soul. You will want to protect your child, as every mother does, but you will not be able to – this child is destined, dedicated, promised in some way to go beyond protection, beyond the safe path.

So how is Mary feeling in all this? and I remembered another conversation with an old lady, in this case a bit closer to home and I do remember her name, it was Alice O’Brien, the organist at Holy Trinity Pascoe Vale in the 1980s, who told me her experience of the old BCP service of thanksgiving after child-birth, commonly called churching of women. This service has no equivalent in the new prayerbook, undoubtedly because we think of it something inherently sexist and demeaning; but this was not her experience. Alice was a woman of strong opinions, not someone

who would say this if she didn't mean it, and she told me for her it had been a matter of bringing her newborn to the church and meeting with the vicar, no one else present, and saying a psalm of thanksgiving, and a couple of prayers, in a way that took seriously and gave full weight to what she had experienced. When I remembered this during the week I looked up the old churching of women service, possibly for the first time ever, because I've never been asked to use it and I've never suggested using it, but it really is what Alice had described: A psalm of thanksgiving, some prayers, and a blessing. The 1928 additions to BCP include two optional prayers, one for the future of the child and the other clearly intended to be used if the child had been stillborn or born disabled in some way.

Now I'm not about to start promoting a return to this particular custom, but I do wonder if we've become too nervous about naming, in the context of worship, certain feelings or experiences that confront us with our own humanity in ways that make us feel uncomfortable. In particular today we need to remember that the readings are certainly about the messianic hopes we might invest in this child who is presented and dedicated 40 days after his birth, but they are just as much about Mary, and about the very human experience of childbirth and the painful consequences of parenthood.

