

Sunday 4 February 2007: Candlemas

Eye Openers

Readings: Malachi 3.1-5; Luke 2.22-40

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Candlemas, comes midway between the joy of the Christmas festival and the suffering and darkness of Passiontide. The season of Epiphany culminating in Candlemas has celebrated the appearance of God – the manifestation of God's presence among us. Yet not all have seen or recognised that presence. Many have been blind to the appearance of Christ or threatened by his coming. It is those at the edges or on the outside whose eyes have been opened to the secrets of God's coming – who have seen beyond the ordinary and recognised the extraordinary signs of God: a young virgin, a carpenter, a group of shepherds, travellers from the East - and now a very old man in the temple holding onto the hope that he will see the Christ before his death and an old 84 year old widow called Anna who lives in the temple

Simeon's revelation, his realisation that his wait has not been in vain is one of the most beautiful moments of epiphany and recognition recorded in the New Testament. The child in his arms is the fulfilment of his faith – the child releases him, sets him free not to cling to a promise but to enter into it. His song is one both of farewell and arrival.

Here we have a meeting between two people at both ends of their lives: a very old man and a very young baby in his arms. And as the Christ child is offered, so we see Simeon's life offered too – both lives offered into the hands of God with all the risk that a real offering involves. Simeon holds all that he has longed for and all that he was promised. It is the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New – a new movement, a new relationship - not out there always the promise beyond us - but here and now: physical, touched, held, real. And this small warm bundle of living, breathing, divine humanity is somehow going to lead us into the future.



I want you to look at Rembrandt's picture of Simeon in the Temple, a copy of which you were given as you came into the church. It was painted at the end of Rembrandt's life in 1669. The third figure at the back of the painting seems slightly wooden and many believe it to be added by a different artist later. It somewhat intrudes into the divine encounter which is the focus of his painting – Simeon and the Christ child glowing out of the darkness, out of the void. Rembrandt was an old man when he painted this, wearied by life and by personal tragedy, now facing his own death. It is an expression, it seems, of the whole of his life: all that he has passed through and all that he hopes for – salvation in his arms.

There is a sacred mingling in this painting – red and gold, blood and light, frailty and power, sacrifice and salvation. Simeon's eyes are heavy-lidded and closed, wearied with an age of watching and waiting, yet his whole face is filled with the wonder of the child he is holding. It is as though he is holding the greatest treasure of all – living gold. Simeon's mouth is open as though he is breathing in the presence of Christ. A dialogue is taking place beyond words, beyond sight and yet apprehended by touch and by the inner senses. The old man is filled with the divine presence, the inner eye is flooded with divine light. And the image of God is not just the child, it is reflected in the face of the old man, both child and old man mirror the same warmth and light. Both child and old man are offerings to God and reflections of God.

Simon Schama describes Rembrandt's painting in this way: 'The old man's cradling hands are immense, held rigid, as if in deepest prayer. His face closed off from the world in an ecstatic trance, glimmers with unearthly brilliance. Behind his heavy lids he has at last seen the light of salvation and is able at last to declare "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace"'. It is as though this child is being offered to us the onlooker. There is no clinging. His hands are held out in prayer. A prayer – that this gift of Christ to us will be our salvation too.

Perhaps there are moments in our lives when we experience, perhaps fleetingly, this divine recognition. It can be at any time – in a meeting, a moment, an event, a relationship. Perhaps we may dismiss it as sentimentality or wishful thinking – but it is much more than this – these are epiphanies which may open us and our eyes to all we are and all we long for.

When my father died he left for me a notebook – it was his prayer book. Recorded there in the shaky handwriting of his last years was a page entitled 'Eye Openers': people, places, events which had opened his eyes to the beyond in the midst of his life. He records the name of Cezanne, his favourite artist whose use of colour and light inspired him, the Purbeck Hills he loved to walk and paint. And at the end of the list, the name of my mother – an eye opener.

And over the last weeks as I have been reflecting upon Simeon, I have been asking the question 'what are the moments in my own life which have opened my eyes to the divine presence?' Yes there are events, and experiences, and holy places but linked with all at the centre of all there are *people*. People you have loved or tried to love; relationships which may have involved pain and grief and struggle and loss as well as joy, yet somehow opened us up to the possibilities of God's love among us – the treasure which Christ says is hidden in our midst.

And if our Christian faith, our faith in Christ and the salvation he brings, is to mean anything, then we have to go on believing in the incarnation of God's love even when we cannot always immediately see it – even in the darkness. Our Christian faith is not about creating positions of defensiveness, control or self-preservation and security. But it is actually about living out,

and out of, the promise of God's love – love incarnated in our own lives and in those we meet.

And of course there is a choice in all of this – a need to stay faithful just as Simeon was faithful, and to be open to the revelations of God which may be in the very ordinary, the very everyday.

Don Juan in his teaching to Carlos Castaneda put it this way: 'Look at every path very closely and deliberately. Then ask yourself alone one question. This question is one that only a very old man asks. It was told to me once when I was young and my blood was too vigorous for me to understand it. Now I understand it – I will tell you what it is: Does this path have a heart? If it does the path is good. If it does not it is of no use.'

When we ask the question 'does this path have a heart?' we realise that the answer is a disclosure only we can know. And that actually that path is the only one which leads to fulfilment.

Each day there are opportunities for our eyes to be opened. It is not always easy. As I prepared to write this address this is what I recorded one day last week in my diary: 'I wake up and wish I was still asleep. Another day with its business and duties. It is dark and windy. I turn on the radio but there is no joy here only more news of conflict scandal and disaster, and global warming. I wash hurriedly and eat on the move. No heart. I go to church but even religion seems far removed. I hate the Old Testament reading which is about violence and war and vengeance. It is only the New Testament reading, from Corinthians that breaks through. Later in the day, however, I meet with a woman who is seeking asylum in this country. She has come to ask me for my prayers for her and her son as she still fears being sent back to the violence. She tells me those fears – so vividly that I fear them too and when she has finished I ask if I can pray with her. Perhaps she does not understand but God does for she kneels down and starts praying herself. She prays in her own language – a prayer like a chant, a song of grief, soft repeated words, from the throat. I cannot understand her language but I can understand the prayer, hear it deeply – she repeats the name of Jesus again and again. And there are tears on her face as she pours out her need of God.

I do not know this woman and I do not know if her prayer will be answered, but I can see her love for God and her love for her son. It is like light – illuminating her, shining out of her. I see a path with a heart. And I feel humbled – as though her prayer is for all of us and I am in the presence of someone very close to God, presenting herself before God – holding Christ.

What can I say to her? I cannot promise that her asylum court case will be successful. What can I say and then the words come to me, words from St Paul - I just say "Nothing, nothing present or to come, no powers, no height, no depth, nor anything in all creation can separate you from the love of God – which is yours in Christ Jesus. And she says "Amen. Amen" and again she repeats the name of Jesus.

Simeon in the temple knew the pain of the love he witnessed, and even in the wonder of realising God's promise of love and salvation and he also witnessed to the pain that love would bring.

"Behold this child is set for the falling and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against and a sword will pierce your own heart.

C.S. Lewis says 'To love is to be vulnerable and the only place where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers and perturbations of love is hell where there is no love'.

Today on this festival of Candlemas we light candles which are signs of the presence of Christ, small flickering flames seemingly vulnerable – like a child in our midst. We can turn away from that light, blow it out, think that it is insignificant, but it has the power and beauty to dissolve the darkness. And we, like Simeon, beholding the Christ child must mirror his light to the world.