

Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation (Candlemas)
3rd February 2019 (transferred from 2nd)

Readings:

Malachi 3:1-5
Hebrews 2:14-18
Luke 2:22-40

“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple,” says the prophet Malachi in our Old Testament reading. It would be a moment people were waiting for – he describes the Lord as the one “whom you seek”. But, he warns, it will not be a comfortable experience for everyone. “Who can endure the day of his coming?” he asks. In the next few verses we read that the Lord will be like a refiner’s fire, someone who purifies, someone who judges. And with good reason, if you read some of the preceding verses – the people and, indeed, the priests – that’s who he means when he says “the descendants of Levi” – had become pretty corrupt. God, says Malachi, was going to act – and we might expect that that action would be a spectacular event with the Lord coming in power with an army of angels ready to execute judgement. Cue thunderbolts, lightnings, earthquakes and whirlwinds!

But that wasn’t what happened. In our gospel reading today we heard of the Lord coming into his temple – but there was no sign of thunderbolts or earthquakes. Just a young couple bringing in a baby – as countless other couples had no doubt done before – to do what the Jewish Law required when a child was born. A firstborn male child had to be presented before God and redeemed by a payment, and a sacrifice had to be made for the mother, who was deemed unclean after the birth, to restore her to full fellowship with the worshipping community. A very ordinary occurrence at the time.

Except, of course, this baby was different – though only those to whom God had revealed it by his Spirit could tell. This baby was the baby Jesus – the Lord, God incarnate. The Lord had come into his temple. God had acted. Today, the Feast of the Presentation, we celebrate that coming, that action. But, on the face of it, it was a very ordinary action.

And that’s typical of the way God seems to prefer to act. Yes, sometimes there are spectacular manifestations of his power – such as the cloud with thunder and lightning when Moses received the Law at Mount Sinai [Exodus 19:16] or the fire that God sent to consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel as Elijah battled it out with the prophets of Baal [1 Kings 18:38]. But so often God acts in the small, the insignificant, the quiet, the human, the friendly and the homely. Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel after that event on Mount Carmel, heard God speak, not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire but in the silence that followed [1 Kings 19:12]. The prophet Isaiah cried out for God to act spectacularly to sort out the evil Isaiah could see – “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the earth would quake...” he says at one point [Isaiah 64:1] – but that isn’t what God did.

No. When God did come down – if that’s the right phrase – it was to be born as a tiny baby.

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That doesn't mean that Malachi's prophecy was wrong. Encounter with Jesus can indeed involve judgement, purification and refining, as Malachi said. But what it does mean is that God wants to deal with us, with his creation, in a different way. He is, we could say, most "ungodlike" – spelling "god" there with a small "g" – in that he doesn't very often act in the way the myths and legends of the pagan gods describe their alleged activities. There can sometimes be earthquakes and thunderbolts, but that is not usually how God works.

And this is perhaps where we can look at the words of Simeon, the man Joseph and Mary met when they came to the temple. Simeon describes the baby Jesus, whom he takes into his arms, as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" [Luke 2:32 – you may like to have the Bible open at the page, page 56 of the NT section].

Jesus is a light for revelation – he reveals what God is really like. He makes God known to us – makes him real to us, as he really is – and not just to one or two people but "the Gentiles" – implying the whole human race. And what is God like? God wants to be with us and to be in our company. He gets involved in the nitty gritty of being human – of being a baby, of being a child, of being a worker, of being a companion and friend, of dealing with all the "mess" that life brings – including, of course, suffering and death.

But Simeon doesn't mention the suffering and death immediately. Let's look at the words he says first – what we often call the "song" in verses 29-32 known as the "Nunc Dimittis" after its first words in Latin. He begins by acknowledging that God's promise to him that he would see the Messiah before he died, has been fulfilled. But what he says is that, in seeing the Messiah, in seeing the baby Jesus, he has seen God's "salvation" ("my eyes have seen your salvation" v 30), and that salvation is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles". It's this revelation, this knowing God as he really is, that lies at the heart of salvation. That's what Jesus came to do. Salvation is not just about repentance and forgiving sins, although of course they are an essential part of it.

Simeon goes on to speak a bit later of the darker events that will come as Jesus fulfils his destiny. In verses 34 – 35 he speaks about the falling and rising of many, which is probably a reference to the need to repent before rising to new life, or it may be a reminder that, though some will rise to new life, others will fall by the wayside. He doesn't directly mention Jesus' death but he implies it by telling Mary that she will have pain – "a sword will pierce your own heart", and warns that Jesus will be "a sign that will be opposed".

But let's go back to the idea that Jesus is "a light for revelation". That's where Simeon begins, and it lies at the heart of what salvation is. Jesus reveals God – that God wants to be with us – he wants a relationship with us. He loves us and want us to love him. Knowing God is not just "knowing about" God. Knowing is knowing like you know your family and friends. And that's what Jesus shows us by becoming one of us.

And then there's that word "light". Light enable us to see – but it's not seeing in the normal physical sense that's meant here.. It is "a light for revelation" – we "see" what God is like.

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Jesus, as it were, shines a light on God for us. But there's more to that word "light" than just that – Jesus, after all, said he was the "light of the world". That's why sometimes we celebrate today by processing into the church with lighted candles – symbolising the coming into the temple of Jesus the light.

Jesus is the light – and he shines on us and on the world. And his light is transforming – as we get to know him, as we see more of him, so we are transformed to be more like him. And indeed, we in turn can reflect that light – revealing God to others. Are you ready to see God, not as some remote being who occasionally intervenes in power, but one who really loves us and wants to be close to us? And are you ready to reflect the light of Christ to reveal that love and encourage that closeness in others?