

Bible Study: 3rd February 2018: Introduction

Setting

The opening chapters of Luke's Gospel contain the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. But the author has a very clear purpose and that is to show how the significance of Jesus Christ far exceeds that of John the Baptist.

One of the ways Luke highlights the greater significance of Jesus is by adding an extra episode to his birth narrative which tells of Mary and Joseph going to the Jerusalem Temple and being greeted by Simeon who proclaims the saving significance of Jesus not just for Israel but for all the nations. It deliberately omits any mention of a key aspect of the presentation of Jesus. As the first born male Jesus was regarded as 'holy to the Lord' and had to be 'bought back' for 5 shekels. But Luke makes no reference to that act of redemption because he wants to underline that Jesus remains 'holy to the Lord': the Divine Saviour is also the Divine Son. This Lucan narrative is the equivalent of Matthew's story of the magi. In both cases the Gentiles are being attracted by the light of God's Son to benefit from the salvation He came to bring. The universality of the Gospel stands at the climax of both infancy narratives.

As we read this passage we are seeing a microcosm of the church, people gathered round Jesus in praise and hope. So let's look at some of the features of that embryonic church and see how they might apply to the church in our diocese today. I want to highlight four features.

The 1st is the **intergenerational** dynamic. There are two elderly figures, Simeon and Anna, there is perhaps a middle aged man in Joseph, a young woman in Mary and the new born Jesus. Whilst conversing with the couple, Simeon takes the Christ child in his arms – so there is a wonderful interaction between them all.

The 2nd is the **male/female balance** upheld by the twin figures of Simeon and Anna. Both played their part in rejoicing in the Christ child and both were involved in proclaiming his importance to others.

The 3rd is the **life/death motif** that runs through the passage. Simeon contemplates his death; he talk about a certain kind of death afflicting Mary's relationship with Jesus ('a sword will pierce your soul') and about the falling of many in Israel. At the same time he greets and embraces a new-born child, speaks of salvation which is all about healing and new life – and refers to the rising of many in Israel.

4th there is the contrast between the **settled and the spontaneous**. In the context of the Temple with its well-established regulations and ceremonies all carefully observed and safeguarded – in other words settled – there comes the spontaneous and prophetic utterance of Simeon. And it is not as though the one supersedes the other but rather that they feed off

each and make the other possible. The sap of new life needs the trunk of the old tree to contain and channel it.

Finally, I move on to look at the 3 challenges posed by the story.

Poverty is the first point I want to identify. The sacrifice that the parents of Jesus offered at the Temple was the one stipulated for those who were poor: two pigeons or two turtle doves. Clearly the Temple made provision for the less well-off to feel at home in its worship and ritual. But what about us? Are we essentially a middle class Church?

Ken Leech in 'Struggle in Babylon' describes his experience:

'From quite an early age I was conscious of a class division between my own working-class culture and what I saw, from a distance, as the culture of the Church of England. I was conscious of the Church of England as a middle class presence within a mainly working-class community. To become an Anglican involved.. a break with your own culture.'

Philip North, Bishop of Burnley has recently called on the Church of England to renew its mission to the Council Estates of England. David Primrose will have more to say about this later on.

How might we find the resources and the imagination to engage with those who are socially and economically deprived, to be a church for all the people?

The Holy Spirit

This whole narrative is full of references to the Spirit. Three times in connection with Simeon alone. And the implication is that what is happening results from divine influence as much as human initiative. Yet what is happening is not just a continuation of the past. It is an opening up of new perspectives and new possibilities. It will require the shedding of much which has been cherished and regarded as indispensable in the past.

Strong echoes here of our own situation. Something new and unknown and indeed largely unpredictable is emerging as the Spirit broods over the chaos and brings about a new order.

How do we stay responsive to the Spirit and how might we become an increasingly Spirit – filled church?

Nativity

This passage deals primarily with the birth of a child. In a fascinating essay entitled 'Nativity and Natality', Grace Jantzen asks the question why Christianity has become so tied to the subject of mortality. 'The theological focus of Christendom 'she writes' has been much more towards the death of Jesus than towards his birth' (page 111). In our western world mortality – the fact that we all die – 'has been taken as central to our self-understanding, while natality – the fact that we are born – has been largely ignored.' Bill Bryson in 'A Short History of Nearly Everything' concludes: 'If this book has a lesson it is that we are awfully lucky to be here... To

attain any kind of life at all in this Universe of ours appears to be quite an achievement.' (page 423). Why then skip over the amazing fact that we have been born? Likewise whilst Jesus' story might have begun with him as an adult (echoes of Adam) nevertheless it does so through birth and infancy. Jantzen goes on to draw out the implications of natality, but what she finds most significant is that natality speaks of new possibility, creativity, freshness and freedom. It is all about new beginnings. 'Human beings' said Pascal' are born an original and die a copy.'

So to have this passage as a kind of keynote this morning is to invite the expectation that inspired by the birth of Jesus the church should be looking for new things, undreamt of developments, fresh opportunities – indeed all the things that might accrue from a theology inspired by natality.

Bible Study: Evangelism

We tend to think of evangelism as sharing the good news of Jesus with those outside the church. So this passage is not at first very promising because everything it describes takes place within the confines of the Jerusalem Temple. We seem to be dealing with the 'converted', with those who are already on the inside of the religious institution and comfortable with it. But perhaps that in itself is prodding us to think afresh about aspects of evangelism which intrinsically belong to what happens inside our churches. Mission is often described as 'reaching out' but perhaps it can be just as much about 'rallying round'

But before we think a bit more about that, lets at least notice that Anna is doing the work of an evangelist. As in most Cathedrals today, there were always crowds of people wandering round the courts of the Temple. Some might have come to offer sacrifices and among them there would inevitably have been the curious and the cynical who were not at all clear about their inner convictions or what kind of relationship they had with God. So Anna takes advantage of their presence. We read in v38 that she 'began to praise God and to speak about the child'. The Greek says 'went on and on speaking about the child'. She was tireless in her efforts to communicate the importance of Jesus, to the crowds. She sets us an example of how to capitalize on each opportunity that presents itself when people come inside our churches. And this might incidentally involve leaving a message inside the building to help people recognize the significance of what they are seeing and perhaps even to feel encouraged to pray. I still visit many empty churches which have no hint that they are wanting to welcome and communicate with those who enter their doors. Whereas others set up a prayer station with instructions, and if appropriate some even leave coffee and tea-making facilities for any who might value them.

But let's look at the passage more closely. I want to highlight three features of what we read that, for me, have evangelistic potential.

The first is the presentation of the Christ child. This equates to parents bringing their children either for a service of Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child or for a Baptism. It is quite sobering to learn just how many people get involved in that kind of service. Sandra Millar in her recent visit to Telford told us that 2,200 Baptisms take place every week, in the Church of England. There are on average 80 guests at each baptism so if you do your sums that gives us about 175,000 people passing through our churches every week. People who come with all kinds of

mixed ideas about God, and about Church, about what it means to be a Christian. And our challenge is this: how do we communicate enough of the Gospel to capture their imaginations about Christianity so that they begin to see more clearly what it is all about? Here is evangelism in the raw. Here are people on our territory, so to speak, and we need to ask how can we show them the attractiveness of God?

My second point – concerns the importance of Christian worship. If you think about Luke 2²²⁻⁴⁰ then there is no reductionism with regard to the element of worship. We have Simeon uttering his hymn of acceptance of and surrender to God's will; we learn that Anna before speaking to the crowds 'praised God' and we know that all around priests would have been offering sacrifices. So this inevitably leads us to ask – how can worship have an evangelistic impact? Can it touch those who, though not participating directly, nevertheless hear the words and music and silence of the worship being offered by others?

I think the answer is that worship *can* make an evangelistic impact. John Wesley called Holy Communion a 'converting ordinance' and believed that people could come to faith as the sacrament was celebrated with its commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Stephen Sykes made a similar point about the power of worship in his book 'Unashamed Anglicanism'. There he has a chapter entitled 'An Anglican Theology of Evangelism'.

'The 1662 P.B', he writes, 'confronted people of very mixed spiritual capacity and insight, and invited and coaxed them to risk more of themselves in their response to the love and grace and mercy of God. It envisaged 'slow conversion'.

He goes on to agree with Professor Abraham that evangelism is a 'polymorphous activity'. It is done in, with and through a host of other activities...' And when we come to do it we are not surprised, says Sykes, that the 'world is not simply external to us but internal, undermining our own commitment, distracting our singleness of vision and sowing discouragement. But a people, schooled in the disciplines of penitence and constantly reminded of the great and tender mercy of God, is moved by God's love to lift up its heart, a heart whose very pulse is the praise of God.' (p209/10)

In saying this, Sykes is suggesting that the rhythms of worship which reflect the encounter between sinner and holy God, and then the restoration of that sinner to right relationship with God create an atmosphere in which others begin to glimpse the wonder of God's grace. All of this was likely happening in the Temple on the day Joseph and Mary brought their child.

Being close to those who are praying or praising can make a deep impression on those who watch and wonder. On the day Bonhoeffer was to be hung the Camp Doctor recorded what he saw just minutes before his death.

'Through a half open door I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, still in his prison clothes, kneeling in fervent prayer to the Lord his God. The devotion and evident conviction of being heard that I saw in the prayer of this intensely captivating man moved me to the depths.'

I don't think we should underestimate the power of well-ordered and well-focused worship to touch the hearts of unbelievers and half-believers.

My final point is to think about Joseph and Mary as they came to the Temple that day. They came as a married couple seeking to begin the spiritual nurture of their child. Many years ago I read a throwaway line by John Coventry S.J (Christian Truth page 66).that marriage is the primary vehicle of evangelism in today's church. Nothing, he argued, outweighs the influence of devout Christian parents in showing a young mind and heart the joy of knowing God. General Osbourne of the Salvation Army agreed: 'Long before I knew of God in Christ I saw Him and loved Him in my mother.' And D.S.Cairns wrote: 'God had all my life through my father been telling me how he felt towards me.'

So perhaps we need to ask ourselves are we doing all we can to strengthen Christian marriage and parenting in our church life? What provision do we make for Marriage Preparation? Is it just a quick chat about the service and what hymns they want, or do we go much deeper in exploring with them the meaning of their vows and life-long commitment? What efforts do we make to stay in touch with Baptism families? Sandra Millar says that 2/3rd of families who approach the church for baptism expect the church to stay in touch. And even though they do not respond for a year or two we should maintain the stream of communication. Indeed, do we make enough of baptism itself? King Louis IX of France said this:

'I think more of the place where I was baptized than of where I was crowned. The dignity of a child of God, bestowed on me at baptism, Is greater than that of a ruler of a kingdom. The latter I shall lose at death; the other shall be my passport to everlasting glory.'

How do we convey that sense of occasion and significance with regard to baptism? How do we help people see that this can be a life-changing moment? 'A still weak sense of baptismal gifting and responsibility leaves a great deal more exploration to be done on how to perform baptism services' is Robin Greenwood's view and I think it needs to be heard. Here again we might well be losing a vital evangelistic opportunity for lack of imagination and lack of emphasis.

In 1 Peter we read that judgement begins with the household of God. One of the lessons of Luke 2v22-40 is, I believe, that evangelism also begins within the household of God.

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