

Presentation of Christ

Diocesan Sermon

Micah 3: 1 - 5
Hebrews 2: 14 - end
Luke 2: 22 - 40

31st January 2021

So there we have it, the account of Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to the temple,
And there, encountering Simeon and Anna.

One of the monthly challenges in the church where I used to be the vicar was for a small group of us to come up with an engaging all age talk in the sermon slot. More often than not, it involved a wee drama.

I remember us playing out this story of the presentation of Christ. The challenge was to think of something that was engaging for the children, and with hopefully a little bit of food for thought for the adults also.

We decided to act this story, out and somehow, they needed to get a sense of the passing of the years,

and the faithfulness and the waiting of Simeon and Anna.

So we began with a young and sprightly Simeon and Anna, earnestly and eagerly kneeling, praying and doing a bit of dusting too around the temple.

A couple arrived to present a child at the temple and Simeon and Anna welcomed them briefly and then carried on with their activities.

This scenario happened three times, broken each time with a placard held up that said first, 'Ten Years Later', then 'Another ten years later' and finally, 'Yet another ten years later'.

Each time Simeon and Anna prayed for the saviour to come and to be a light in their darkness.

In each round of the play the events were the same, kneeling and praying, dusting and the welcoming of families to the temple.

The only difference is that Simeon and Anna got a bit slower in their activities, kneeling became a challenge as did getting up again, and prayer moved from lots of words to greater silence and waiting...

But on the last occasion, the reaction to this final couple and child was dramatically different.

Simeon took the child in his arms and as he did the choir from the balcony sang the Nunc Dimittis,

'Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

As the Nunc Dimittis ends,

Simeon looked at the congregation with babe still in arms and simply said, 'Be faithful, keep watch, wait and pray.'

Our little play captured something of the humble ordinariness of Christian faithfulness through the years.

Faithfulness to prayer, to waiting and trusting, to devotion and service when all seems too routine and ordinary.

This pandemic that has now gone on too long and too painfully is especially a time for this kind of faithfulness to our calling.

But before I end, I want to say something briefly to those of you who, with me, feel rather like Simeon and Anna in the play.

You've been a Christian a long time and the early eagerness and honeymoon has passed.

For a long time, too long in fact, I tried to hold onto that early zeal.

I wrongly interpreted its passing as a diminishing of faith.

I got tired of the sound of my own voice in prayer.

God became...well for a time I would have said, more distant,

But in time I realised that it was more accurate to say that God fitted less into my human constructs, less known, more of a mystery, seemingly absent,

And yet, as contradictory as it sounds, even more pervasively present,

but present in way that remains beyond the grasp of my mind,

and the limits that I had set of where God dwells.

I've stopped trying to grasp water in my hands.

The Welsh poet priest, R S Thomas, puts it well when he says,

He is such a fast God, always before us, and leaving as we arrive.

If your well feels dry.

If questions and doubts are louder within you than faith and answers,

It maybe isn't that your faith is dwindling, or that God isn't in fact there.

It might be that you have something to surrender, that something needs to die,

Initially, it might well feel like loss.

But again, quoting R S Thomas, 'there is meaning in the waiting'.

What I'm saying here is not for everyone, but will I hope resonate for a few who need to hear this right now.

You have not come to the end of the road.

God remains God and though often seemingly silent or absent,
remains mysteriously, all pervasively present.

Embrace the God who has become bigger than your brain can imagine,
or my words articulate.

But how, you might ask?

Well, the answer is the same for all of us,

whether we feel like a young middling or old Simeon and Anna.

By humble trust, by faithfulness to a simple rule of life that includes prayer,
prayer with or without words,

by service, by devotion, by love of your neighbour and yourself,

by watching and waiting...

This is the Way.

May God bless your watching and waiting.

Amen

Revd Paul Cowan