

Finding ourselves in the Temple: what will God reveal to each of us?

Introduction to the service

This evening we come to the end of the Epiphany season. This season that carries us through the darkness into the light that came with the celebration of the birth of Jesus. A light that we believe brings promise and hope into the darkness. The season culminates on 2nd February, which we are celebrating today - the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also known as Candlemas. We come to the end of the 40 days of Christmas. If you still have your Xmas tree up, it's time to take it down! It marks the transition from the Christmas cycle to the cycle of Lent and Easter – a kind of midpoint in the spiritual journey of our souls.

In the words of Simeon we hear a reminder of the significance of the light that has shone in the darkness, a light to lighten the way for all people – for the salvation of all creation:

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

We will bless and light candles at the end of the service, which we take home to remind us of the light that has come into the world. And we see it in the world around us, the days are getting that little bit longer and lighter. We feel it. And we're invited to consider how we will live it.

And then with Simeon we turn our minds towards the significance of the light as we continue on our journey towards Lent and Easter. With Mary, we hear Simeon's prophecy:

Then Simeon^[1] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

In our service tonight we'll spend more time in prayer and meditation than we usually do in our Sunday service. I invite you to enter into the spirit of it and to be open to the ways in which God is revealing Godself to you – how is God speaking to your inner thoughts?

Homily

Christmas and Epiphany are the seasons of revelation with the central theme idea that the significance of God's love and salvation is revealed for all people, everywhere through all kinds of means. The readings set for us on Sundays have reflected that. From the unlikely people who were the first to witness the birth of the Messiah, to the material objects that pointed to the meaning of this birth - the gifts of the Magi, or the water used at the Baptism of Christ - the ordinary stuff of the world points us towards the extraordinary, to God's revelation of Godself to us.

Today that culminates in the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. This was another standard event in the lives of ordinary Jews. Every firstborn male was to be designated as holy to the Lord. And like good faithful Jews Mary and Joseph do just that. What that means is that the child has to be taken to the Temple, the place where the Ark of the Covenant, on which the Ten Commandments were written, was enshrined.

Luke uses this event to really drive home one of the central messages of the incarnation and themes of his Gospel: the importance of those, who are seemingly on the margins. Luke is their champion. God

becoming human means the lifting up of the lowly and the humbling of the mighty and using the lowly as messengers of his love.

In the Temple in Jerusalem – a dazzling magnificent display of the Jewish belief that the whole world was ordered around God – it is old Simeon and old Anna who reveal God. They may be devout; but they're not powerful or polished.

At the church I served in Washington D.C., the church was open on weekdays and a lot of DC's downtown community of people who were homeless, would come and sit in the church during the day. There was one older lady who shuffled in most days with her shopping cart piled high with tied up plastic bags bursting with her treasured possessions. She would sit in one of the pews about half way down on the left for most of the day. She didn't smell wonderful, so other people used to keep their distance. Sometimes you'd come in to the church and she'd be humming a tune, other times she'd be chatting away to herself, or eating a packet of biscuits and often flicking through the pages of her beaten up Bible. A lot of the time she seemed to be in a world of her own.¹

Anna might have been a bit like that lady. She fasted and prayed night and day. And then at that moment when she saw Jesus, she began to praise God and speak about the child to all these people who were waiting for the redemption of Israel. We don't even know what it was Anna said, but we know that she saw something in that child that others hadn't seen.

And what about Simeon? He was an old man who was righteous. That's about all we know. The Holy Spirit rested on him, but were the other temple goers aware of him before that moment? Simeon had no doubt seen countless babies brought into the temple for the dedication; how did he see that this one was different?

Simeon and Anna can see God. Simeon and Anna can see God in that which is not obviously God. As we move from Epiphany towards Lent and Easter, we are invited to think about how, who and what we see as we look for God's revelation.

How do we nourish the capacity we observe in Simeon and Anna to see differently?

Going to do something a bit different this evening – it's a busy time of year for many of us, let's carve out some time now to be with God. We're going to spend a bit of time imaging ourselves in the Temple. Invite you to close your eyes and picture yourself in the Temple in Jerusalem – let's see what God has to reveal to each of us.

It's a big place and it's just waking up at the start of another day. The forecourt is already filled with the noises of squawking birds – turtle doves and pigeons tightly packed into cages ready for purchase. Their vendors sit on upside down wooden crates, shifting from side to side trying to keep warm in the cool winter morning and counting their pennies hoping that today will see more families coming to offer sacrifices in thanksgiving for the birth of their firstborn or for some other reason. You find yourself in the crowd of people arriving at the Temple.

There are babies crying, anxious parents trying to soothe them. There are a lot of priests and clerics moving through the chambers of the Temple with more or less of a sense of purpose.

It's pretty dark inside once you get through the forecourt, but there are candles to light the way as you make your way through the clouds of smoke billowing out of the incense burners. The smell of incense starts to replace the stench that filled the outer courtyard and you find yourself drawn in deeper into the Temple. You find a corner of one of the inner chambers of the Temple and settle down.

¹ Didn't end up using this example in my homily

Look around you and allow yourself to get lost in the splendour of your surroundings...

Now there is a bit of commotion. An old man is striding towards one small family who have been patiently waiting in the queue. You can tell from his attire that he is a holy man, but he's not in charge. Barely asking the mother's permission, he lifts the baby from his mother's arms and bursts into the most stirring chant.

The deep strong tones of the old man's voice bely his old age and his whole being appears caught up in this hymn of praise.

Something about seeing salvation and a light for all peoples. Allow the tones to resonate through your bones.

As he returns the baby to his mother, the old man blesses baby and parents and speaks softly in the mother's ear. From the look on her face these were words she would never forget. And then he disappears.

Now I invite you to stay in the temple and spend some moments there. You may choose to talk to someone in the temple about what you've seen and heard.

Maybe you go and find out from Simeon how he was so sure that this was Salvation.

Maybe you spend time with Anna and hear what she said when she told people about the child.

You might choose to find Mary and talk to her about your hopes and dreams and your fears and anxieties.

Perhaps you ask Mary if you can just sit there with Jesus.

Take some moments now just to be in the Temple. Ask God to shine the light for you to see what God has for you today.

6 mins

The candles we will light and bless now are for you to take home. Let them be an invitation to you to pray for the gift of sight, to see God's revelation for you in the ordinary stuff of life and in the unexpected people who God places in your path. Let them be an invitation to see as Simeon and Anna see.