

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

30th January 2022

(Luke 2.22-40, 1 Cor 13, Psalm 48)

A Reflection by Corinne Craymer

The birth of every new baby born into a loving family is such a joyful event and one which will bring a tear to the most hardened heart! I remember when our grandson Toby was born on St Stephen's Day two years ago and we were allowed a quick hospital visit, I found it very hard to express in words what my heart was feeling as I held him for the first time. The gift of the most beautiful child in the world of course! And I bet I'm not alone in thinking this. Most people will have experienced the joy of celebrating new life either with family or friends.

Mary's heart must be full of pride and joy as she and Joseph make their way to the temple to present their Son as per the Jewish custom. It's forty days since Jesus was born and time for Jewish ritual obligations: Mary's purification after giving birth and a sacrifice of two doves as a thanksgiving for Jesus.

They will have put much preparation into this Temple visit as proud and devout Jews, expecting a priest to offer their sacrifice. They surely are not expecting two people to greet them, two people moved by the Holy Spirit through lifelong prayer. Simeon's hope and promise is that he will see Israel's salvation before he dies. And now here in the Temple where the Holy Spirit leads him, he sees the fulfilment of that promise by God. He sees the child and takes him in his arms. Assured by The Holy Spirit, he is gazing at The Messiah.

Simeon's response of praise to God is one we all know so well if we have ever been to Evensong. We call it the Nunc Dimittis, song of Simeon, which we say or chant together. 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant 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'.

It's a cry of consolation which has finally come for faithful Simeon. His long years of patient hoping, waiting, and faithful belief, have been vindicated. Prayer, which can involve long periods of waiting, has been answered. God has come.

Simeon has not finished though, for he turns to Mary, having blessed her and Joseph, and offers them his ominous prophecy, 'This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-and a sword will pierce your own soul too'. Even here at what is the joy of The Incarnation, of God with us, we hear a note that speaks of the cross to come.

Amazed and very probably confused, Mary and Joseph now meet Anna, the elderly prophetess, also a faithful soul, hoping for salvation. The Holy Spirit speaks also through her, recognising the long-awaited Saviour. She is truly the first evangelist who discerns God speaking to her. Both she and Simeon are able to discern so much because they have spent a lifetime listening to God.

Maybe there's something in this that we can take away and think about. Do we spend time simply listening to God or are we so busy asking and petitioning that we never stop to listen to God's answer? It's Simeon's great reward that God's response is one of love for Israel and mirrors Simeon's own unselfish love for his people. God has sent his only Son to save us because he loves us.

Our other reading for tonight is the beautiful passage from 1 Corinthians which speaks of just such unselfish and sacrificial love. This entire story is about love: parents love for their child, Simeon and Anna's love for God, God's love for his people which is immeasurable. We can only see dimly for now, only understand in part.

This depth of God's love that knows no bounds is so often beyond our understanding. As flawed human beings we cannot know what it's like to never envy or boast, to never be arrogant or rude and never complain. We so often find ourselves falling at the first hurdle, but the point is that we must persevere in trying to find the better way. It is important that we do try to be patient and kind and hope in God's promise to us. And we know that even as faith, hope and love console us, that the greatest of them all is love. How do we know it? Because we feel it.

I lost a dear friend just before Christmas. She had been unwell, but her death came suddenly and touched us all in different ways. At a time when joy is naturally expressed I found myself in a sad place, needing to turn to scripture for God's reassuring and loving word to us and there in Romans I found the consolation I was looking for...

'For I am sure that neither death nor life nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

These words are often used at the beginning of a funeral service because of the reassurance they offer and the deep sense of consolation they can bring.

Like Simeon and Anna we can, despite the worst that life may throw at us, praise the God who loves us by sending us his only Son Jesus Christ to be our Saviour. Thanks be to God. Amen.