

CANDLEMAS SERMON

University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

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May I Speak in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

During the Epiphany we have been thinking about the true nature of Jesus and how it was revealed, first to the gentile magi, and last week we talked about the disciples and now, today, with the Nunc Dimmittis we have Jesus revealed to the people.

If you remember my sermon last week, I talked about what qualities of leadership Jesus had to enable him to call his disciples into ministry with two words: *Follow Me*. And how he gave them the courage and clarity of purpose to drop everything - their home, their work, their family, their livelihood - and follow Jesus. I mentioned a light and a painting of Rembrandt's "The Head of Christ" and I know some of you might have looked that up. Now how extraordinary that this week's gospel was also painted by Rembrandt?

In his very last year, when he was 63, it seems that the very final canvas painted in his studio was the portrait which he entitled *Simeon with the Infant Christ in the Temple*. They don't believe it was actually finished because it has much duller light than his previous works, but I find it incredibly moving and extremely poignant that that was Rembrandt's last picture.



Rembrandt's final treatment of this subject was quite different from the two he had painted as a young man. The earlier works are richly detailed; the Christ child and Simeon are bathed in a bright light from above; the infant's head in each is surrounded by a golden aura in keeping with the artistic conventions of the day; the old man is depicted as a commanding figure in a luxuriant robe; there are family members clustered about them, and in the second painting there is a crowd of onlookers on the temple steps. By contrast, the final version is stripped down to its essentials. Rembrandt's palette is muted. In this painting there is no high drama of light and shadow, no colourful costumes, no pageantry, no onlookers, no arresting details - just an old man and a baby close up, with another figure, Anna, behind them in shadow who may have been added later by an assistant.

And why I think this is important is that we know that Simeon was a devout and religious man. He sings the canticle of thanksgiving, which we have just heard, for having been allowed to live to see this day:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
According to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
And the glory of thy people of Israel.*

And here is this beautiful ability of Simeon to see Christ in a child's face, for we are talking about a baby who is only 6 weeks old; it is only 40 days since Mary gave birth and she is coming to the temple for purification. This festival is often also called, not just the Candlemas Ceremony, but the Ceremony of Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. Under Jewish law, a mother had to offer sacrifice in the Temple after the birth of a child, in order to be counted clean.

And of course, as he is brought to the Temple, the old man Simeon, guided (Luke tells us) by the Holy Spirit, recognises in this child what he had been praying and hoping for all his life.

"My eyes have now seen your salvation. Here is Israel's glory, and here is God's light for those outside Israel, the Gentiles" (Luke 2:30).

But there is another character also in the Temple with Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. And that's Anna. And I love the fact there is both a man and a woman recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. We think she was at least eighty four years old and the temple is where she belonged; she hadn't come for a special reason, she was just there, caught up in the drama of Mary and Joseph and their presentation (and as they were so poor they could only afford turtle doves). But she too recognised that this ordinary looking baby is someone very special.

This is when my heart goes out to Mary. She has been visited by an angel, given birth to the Messiah, been visited by the magi and some shepherds, and now suddenly she is foretold not only of the existence of the Messiah that she has given birth to, but also that sadly she too will suffer. We have the sense that the piercing of Mary's soul is the second part of Simeon's message to us.

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed to that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:35)

And that is so important because, when Rembrandt painted it at last in his final throes of life, we think that within an unearthly brilliance, he also realises that there is also a shadowy void which Jesus comes into. Jesus' life is not all about light and it is not all about hope. It is also about the darkness and suffering that he will incur at the crucifixion and on the cross; that his mother will incur seeing her son die while suffering terribly in front of her very eyes, piercing her soul. And on top of that it is also realising that our lives are impacted by suffering as well.

We have today to contemplate one of the difficulties of being a member of the Anglican Communion. On Friday the house of Bishops published a report on marriage and same-sex relations for discussion at the general Synod next month. And the report comes after 2 years of shared conversations with people across the church about the c of e stance. Now many had hoped that this would be a signal to, in a sense, take a big leap in the understanding of what I would call true mercy, compassion and love of all in our communion. So if we were able to go a yard, I believe that many of us thought we would go perhaps a foot. But sadly this report seems to reflect that our Bishops have moved only an inch.

I could go into the details of it, why there might be a slightly better indication of what informal prayers could be given to people after they've had a civil ceremony or same-sex marriage and where there might be some quote, "some freedom in pastoral accommodation of these circumstances". But really, even though this the beginning of another round of discussions, a beginning of a call of a new report on issues of sexuality related to the Church of England, it seems that the Bishops have not really heard. And for many people in the LBTQI community and liberal Anglo-Catholics and also people in the secular world this will cause a lot of hurt and a lot of suffering. So I am today going to propose that perhaps the crux of the story is that the light which we always talk about, the shining light of Christ, is sometimes but a flickering candle.

Mary will see Jesus rejected by the very city he is offering peace to and the very people he had come to rescue will be his executioners. And so I feel that today we let Simeon turn us in the direction of the cross, remembering that following Jesus is also about sacrifice and faithfulness in the face of suffering. William Blake wrote a brilliant poem called *On Another's Sorrow* and in the last stanza he says:

*When times are dark
And we are feeling pain
That our grief he may destroy
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.*

Blake talks about the form of God mercy will take; he gives his joy to all when he "comes as an infant child" in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and "becomes a man of woe" as Christ did in the time leading up to and including his crucifixion. But the poem ends with comfort to the reader that his creator will not desert him and will in fact "sit by us and moan" when we suffer.

And so the only sense that I can bring to this is that the church *will* be merciful and *will* be compassionate. There *have* been changes. When I left university a woman could not even be a Deakin. After 10 years, we had the first priesting of women and only 2 years ago were women allowed onto the Episcopate. You might say that that journey towards women being in the Episcopate, started over 100 years ago with the Suffragettes. It is a long journey but it is a good journey, and it is a journey where people of faithfulness have sought God's love and God's compassion.

And I just want to wrap up with one person I admire deeply, and to whom I turn to often in times of difficulty, and I believe every single person training for ordination in the Church of

England should read Karen Armstrong's book, *The Bible*, (2010). And I want to quote from her as I leave you this morning.

She suggests that we do not need literal interpretation of sacred texts because fundamentalists call that word 'interpretation', Truth with a capital T. Armstrong stresses that we see that sort of literal interpretation of the bible as a recent development. Until the nineteenth century, for example, very few readers imagined that the first chapter of Genesis was a factual account of the origin of life. For centuries, Christians and Jews alike insisted that a wholly literal reading of the Bible was neither "possible nor desirable". She says that biblical interpreters "felt free to change it and make it speak to contemporary conditions ... the Bible 'proved' that it was holy because people continuously discovered fresh ways to interpret it ... exegetes continued to make the Word of God audible in each generation". I believe that she bases that exegesis on the principle of charity, and so do we.

It is so important that the message of Candlemas and the presentation of Christ at the Temple encourage us to be on the look-out, as Simeon and Anna were, for small signs of hope; to be aware of the light, even if it is faint, and to help it to grow. It tells us to nurture new life, however fragile, rather than writing it off as insignificant. When Simeon and Anna saw a six week old baby Jesus, they did not see doctrine or church history; they saw the only thing possible emanating from his face: compassion, mercy, light and love. Let us look out for that in all people always.

Amen.