

Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Second Sunday of Christmas, 2 January 2005

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 21-40

Another new year has begun. What it holds in store for us we don't know. What we do know is that we hope to live through it, and that it is full of goodness, kindness, friendships, and challenges that we can meet.

Today's gospel reading about Jesus being circumcised on the 8th day, being named, and then being presented at the temple 33 days later on about the 40th day after his birth, is all about keeping to the Jewish law and tradition. (Leviticus 12.2-8)

Mary and Joseph observed the law by showing their thanksgiving for the safe delivery of their first born child, a son, by bringing two birds for sacrifice — if they had been wealthier they would have brought a lamb to the priest to be sacrificed.

The Christian service of baptism of infants soon after birth is a similar religious ritual of observing the required practice and tradition of a faith community.

So today's gospel begins as a simple story of a family doing the right thing.

But it develops into something more. When reflecting on it this week, what struck me was the faithfulness of the two old people in the temple — Simeon and Anna. Both being faithful to the spirit and letter of Jewish law.

I wondered why this had not occurred to me before; it must be that as I am getting older I can identify with them more!

We are told that Simeon is "righteous and devout," he is "looking forward to the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah."

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon comes into the temple and then through faith, he takes the baby in his arms, and praises God saying:

"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..."

We continue to say these words at evening prayer and Compline, or Prayer at the End of the Day, as it is called in our new prayer book, and traditionally they are said by the priest as he or she leads the funeral casket in or out of the church.

And then there is Anna, a woman of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty four. She never leaves the temple, but worships there with fasting and prayer night and day.

At the same moment that Simeon takes Jesus into his arms, Anna begins "to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Now if we stay within the story, let us remember that Jesus did not have a halo round his head, he was very small, a month and a half old, looking much like this. (hold doll wrapped in cloth in my arms) Mary was not in blue silk, and Joseph did not have an angel sitting on his shoulder.

So what can we learn from this little story about two devout old people hanging around the temple all the time, who suddenly make extravagant claims about a poor couple's baby? If it happened today we would be wondering if they were in the first stages of senile dementia!

Rather than that being so, may I suggest another possibility... that they act in this way because they are people of great faith.

I still find the definition of faith in Hebrews 11 works well enough: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

Simeon and Anna had this kind of faith — some would call it a simple faith, some a naive faith, but it is also the kind of faith which allows Simeon and Anna to take risks, to declare for all to hear that a child of poor parents is the promised one, the messiah, that Israel has been waiting for.

It's a faith that gives one the courage to be brave, to take risks, to experience joy.

It's a faith that allows Anna and Simeon to greet and embrace their destiny.

So at the beginning of 2005, I suggest that we, each one of us, would do well to reflect on the quality of our own faith... our faith in our God, in life, in our own life, and in our place in the world.

No doubt this year we will have our high and low times, our busy times and our slow times, our good and bad times — and the biggest swings in the pendulum will usually happen when we don't expect them, so that sometimes, often perhaps, we will find ourselves unprepared for them, and feel at a loss to know what we should do.

We will sometimes dither, we will let opportunities for experiencing life at a deeper level slip by, we will not be ready to respond to our own moments of destiny. All of us have these life changing moments, which are moments of destiny for us, in that they are times of decision making which will affect the rest of our lives.

They are times when we are called to new ventures...

New possibilities...

New challenges and difficulties...

We can embrace them, tell everyone about them, as Anna and Simeon did, and risk looking like fools, or we can let them go by without a response because of our fearfulness of the next step into the unknown.

If we become too afraid to act then we live a half life, too worried about what others think, too anxious to fit in, too afraid to let go of what we have.

What does 2005 have in store for us? We don't know.

Will God touch us this year? Will God challenge us to do and be and act differently? We don't know. But one thing we do know is that if we sense that the Holy Spirit is with us... then — We can say yes. We can say no. We can say not now — later.

And what we do will depend on our faith in our God, and in ourselves... and what we do will influence the way we build our own souls, and the way we contribute to the completion of the world, and the coming of the kingdom of God.

What a high calling we have!

If we have the kind of faith that Simeon and Anna had, then those of us who are older can dare to believe that our dreams can come true, and the younger among us can claim the right to follow their visions of how the world should be.

Each one of us can act by faith that our God is present in the world, that what we do matters, and contributes to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

So this year let us all be brave like Anna and Simeon. Let us dare to take the journey that begins where the path ends... for as St Paul reminds us:

We walk by faith and not by sight.

Amen.