

Candlemas: Outshining the Power of Death

Sermon for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, 2 February 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

Malachi 3: 1-4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2: 14-18; Luke 2: 22-40

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+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Over the last five weeks we've seen the Christmas season expand into the Epiphany season, with each week bringing a new revealing of Christ and his universal mission. Today we celebrate his Presentation as an infant in the Temple, as we move towards the climax of these Epiphany stories with the Transfiguration. An old name for the Presentation is Candlemas, with its focus on the light of Christ through the use of candles. In France it's called Chandeleur, as in chandelier or candelabra, when the French eat crepes—which are round as a reminder of the sun's disk.

Now, this is all very interesting, but what does it have to do with our lives in the real world? The first hint comes at Christmas, when we hear from Isaiah that "on those living in the land of the shadow of death, light has dawned" and from Luke that the Christ child comes

“to shine on those who live in darkness, and in the shadow of death.” In today’s gospel, in his account of the Presentation, Luke further weaves this conviction into the story of Jesus’ origins. We’re introduced to two ancient prophets of Israel, Simeon and Anna, who are both clearly living in the land of death’s shadow due to their advanced age. Both of them give way to long-pent up rejoicing at the sight of Jesus. Here is the long expected hope of Israel and Judah, the Messiah anticipated by Malachi at the very end of the Old Testament, from whom we hear this morning, whose arrival is celebrated by Simeon and Anna on behalf of God’s ancient people.

For Simeon it means a release at last from his long vigil: his cry “Lord now you are dismissing your servant in peace” is the same phrase that a slave would use in the formal action of being released from his servitude by the master. At last Simeon can close his tired old eyes, and meet his death in peace, because of what he’s been privileged to witness. As for old Anna, a widow of nearly seven decades standing, she forgets her status as a woman and her likely shame as a cursed and marginal figure and rejoices openly, harassing the passers-by with her zeal for the infant Jesus. His light has banished the darkness of death, bringing a new dawn for Israel and for all humanity.

Friends, this theme of death is taken up in our Epistle today from Hebrews, and how Jesus comes among us to end humanity’s

enslavement to death's power. There's that slavery motif again, which we hear on the lips of old Simeon in the act of casting it off. Let me talk to you about this power of death, which Hebrews associates with the power of the Devil. But let's make sure that we don't get tangled up.

We're not talking here about death as a natural biological process, which entered the evolutionary journey of life on earth as a by-product of sexual reproduction, as we now know to be the case. That is, when evolution gave rise to new forms of life that divided themselves between cells kept genetically pristine for reproduction, all the other body cells could then specialise into a diversity of new organs and functions. But the result of all the fashioning and refashioning of new types of body parts led to all those non-reproductive cells losing genetic coherence over time, which is the reason why our bodies age, decay, and die.

Sorry for this compressed lesson in evolutionary biology, but my point in giving it is that biological death is now seen to be the price that complex sexually reproducing lifeforms pay for all their rich diversity, not to mention all that sex! So ageing and death, the mere fact of death, is biological, and it's ultimately unavoidable—it's the

price we pay for being the wonderful creatures that we are.¹ But the power of death and the fear of death are cultural, and these are things that we *can* do something about.

Now, of course, a lot of people will tell you that they don't fear death. And that's certainly true. I've seldom if ever had pastoral conversation with someone in their mid-90s who isn't tired of the long burden of years and who isn't ready to relax into the gentle embrace of death. They feel they've lived long enough. Likewise, I've talked with younger, terminally ill people who are at peace with their coming death. And with military people on the eve of deployment who are philosophical about their very real risk of death. But I think the power of death and the fear of death work more subtly.

For some, the power of death and the fear of death is a fear of being forgotten, of death revealing that their lives didn't amount to much. Hence for them the power of death is the power to unravel the identity they've built up. Here the Devil is best understood as representing the voice of accusation, because of course Satan in the Bible is always ultimately the accuser, the advocate for the prosecution, telling us we're unworthy, that we're unloved and

¹ If you would like to read, or listen to, a lively and fascinating broadcast lecture about the relationship between sexual reproduction, ageing and death, from one of its modern discoverers—along with some fascinating extras like the evolutionary advantage of menopause and of women living longer than men—click on the following link to the BBC Reith Lectures of 2001 (the adjacent lectures are of great interest, too, on the subject of ageing): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2001/lecture3.shtml#top>

unlovable, that we're unemployable, unmarriageable, and failures at the things we've set out to achieve. And so our death looms not as a natural biological process, as the ending that gives our life some shape and opens the way for new generations. Instead, our death looms as a threat to who we think we are, as an acid that eats away at the narrative continuity of our life story.

I think that this is why many people today are so keen to see euthanasia legalised. Because a painful and prolonged death, with all the supposed humiliations of being found needy and powerless, reveals too terrible a truth about us: that we're fragile and dependent all our lives *really*, and that whatever honours and plaudits we've won in life, whatever grand story we and others might tell about us, we're likely to die as frail creatures with no control and no dignity—except what others are able to bring to our ending through their loving kindness towards us, which we don't reckon to be enough. So we want to make sure it doesn't come to that. Hence the clamouring for euthanasia, which I suggest is best understood as an attempt to preserve a narrative of control and independence—about overcoming not death itself but *the power of death*.

That's also why we see "Trump" written in big letters on top of buildings in as many places as possible. And this is why we see the likes of Trump needing to demonstrate their power over others, their

greater worth than others, and why they surround themselves with beautiful young women to make them feel that they're not old and unwanted. It's all about the power and fear of death, which can then spread more widely to infect a whole nation.

Even young people experience the power and fear of death, but at a young age it announces itself as FOMO, as the fear of missing out. Or else they fear being unpopular, undesirable, uncool, and unfashionable; hence the epidemic of what René Girard calls *gymnastica nervosa*. And hence today's culture of tattooing among the young, so that their life story can be inscribed on their body in visible form, which is the only permanence that a post-Christian, post-institutional, post-political age can imagine for itself.

In all these cases the power and fear of death is at least partly about the loss of identity, the loss of recognition, the loss of distinctiveness, and the power of this fear makes the world go round.

So, friends, isn't it a wonderful alternative reality that we celebrate here this morning? As Hebrews tells us today, God wades into the midst of our fragile human condition in Jesus Christ, and by facing death in its most shameful and hurtful form, culturally not just physically, the power of death is broken. And so, as James Alison reminds us, the universally dreaded place of shame is revealed to be

habitable after all, and to hold no particular terrors for us. And so say Simeon and Anna, who we meet close to the end of their lives, who know this and who rejoice over it in our gospel today.

And what of us? For every one of us who's known bereavement, or bitter failure, the loss of a marriage, or a job, the collapse of hopes and dreams, the unravelling of a well-established life-narrative, the loss of any sense of purpose, can now inhabit a new narrative, beyond the fear and power of death. The light of Christ shines on us today, as it first shone on us in our baptism, when an identity fit for eternity was given to us as a gift from God in the family of Jesus Christ. The same light shines on us in our Eucharist today—the eternal splendour of God's only son now enlightening our weeks and days—so that what we do here Sunday by Sunday enables us to inhabit the rest of our lives with a quiet fearlessness.

So, with the psalmist today, we rejoice to find our life established in God's courts, and even if only occasionally we find with the psalmist that our heart and our flesh rejoice in the living God. Because even the most fragile little sparrow has its dwelling by right in God's altar, a place of abiding and of generativity, to which Christians make their way week by week in the Eucharist, to be reminded and re-established in that reality. That's why worshippers bow to the altar, and why we priests kiss it at the beginning and end of the Eucharist.

Friends, on this feast of Candlemas, the light of Christ shining among us reminds us that the power and fear of death have met their match, that our life and our dignity and our future are safe in God's hands thanks to Jesus Christ dying and rising among us:

For the Lord God is a light and a shield,
the Lord gives favour and honour:
and no good thing will he withhold
from those who walk in innocence (Psalm 84: 11).

The Lord be with you...