

First Sunday after Christmass 2020

I hope that you all enjoyed your Christmas celebrations, and I hope you will continue to enjoy this great festival of incarnation and revelation over the coming weeks. We are about to embark on another of the pilgrimages that the Church calendar offers us. Each Sunday we will journey deeper into the thought world of the evangelists as they reveal to us who it is that has been born into our midst, who it is whose spirit animates us and who is our hope and our destiny.

When I first began to study theology we were taught, in line with Aquinas, that there are two categories of 'Revelation.' There is General Revelation this is God's presence accessible to all, the sense of wonder at the created order, the love of family and friends, music and art. But then there is 'Special' Revelation we glimpse in symbol, liturgy, word and sacrament. We glimpse it in each other, it requires something of us; it requires faith but I think above all it requires of a sense of humility. During Advent we experienced this revelation in John the Baptist: I am not worthy so much as to untie his sandal, I must decrease he must increase, and the Blessed Virgin, let it be with me according to your will, my soul magnifies the Lord. .

In today's account of the presentation of Christ in the Temple and we experience it again in the wonderful words of the old man Simeon, words that we know well as the Nunc Dimittis:

*'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.'*

I listened to the Messiah over the last few days, as is my custom! The words of Malachi are familiar to many of us because of Handel. The couple Simeon and Anna also no doubt knew well the prophecy of Malachi: 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple. And who can abide the day of coming.' In the person of Jesus the prophecies are given a complete reworking and this is important if we are to understand the Revelation that will be opened to us over the coming weeks.

In years past the introit for today would have been '*when all things were in quiet silence and night was in the midst of her swift course thine almighty word, O Lord, leapt down from thy royal throne.*' These are words from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom. They speak to us about the very nature of this Revelation, the nature of God coming among us. And over these coming weeks will be engaging in the stories of those who and who were open to the quiet silence. Because as we saw in Advent this coming among us whilst

it happened in history, as our scriptures recall, it is something that happens today should we open to it, alert.

Clearly Simeon and Anna would have been awaiting for the Lord to come to his Temple as prophesied. But no doubt it would be something akin to Handel's 'and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed' complete with angels, trumpets and timpani, like John's revelation at the end of the New Testament. This was not to be; a couple with a humble offering come in to redeem their first born, a small boy about one month old.

Simeon's 'Lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,' the translation we are perhaps more used to, is ours too. There is a sense of let go and let God. This all sounds very modern but there is a tradition going back centuries to the German philosophical tradition and before that to the thirteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) which might help us. This is a part of a sermon by Eckhart.

'Here in time we make holiday because the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St Augustine says this birth is always happening. But if it happens not in me what does it profit me? What matters is that it shall happen in me. We intend therefore to speak of this birth as taking place in us.'

This thinking was taken up by in a German word, 'Gelassenheit', often translated into (philosophical) English as 'releasement.' The word has a very long and important history in German religious and philosophical thought and the philosopher Heidegger particularly picked up on its use by Eckhart. Indeed Heidegger wrote a book entitled 'Gelassenheit', in which he wrote of the way that human willfulness must be replaced by letting be, passive will-lessness!

Eckhart again wrote: *'Where the creature ends, there God begins to be. Now God desires nothing more of you than that you go out of yourself according to creaturely mode of being and let God be God in you.'*

The Amish have picked up on this philosophy, one writer in that tradition wrote: *Gelassenheit carries many meanings—self-surrender, submission, yielding to the will of God and to others, contentment, and a calm spirit. Most important, Gelassenheit is the opposite of bold individualism that promotes self-interest at every turn."*

This is what Christian Revelation is like. Not trumpets, or timpani but the sense that we 'magnify the Lord' in other words move over so that God may be bigger, a larger presence within us. This is what this season is about, it is perhaps, surprisingly, best put in the Carol O Little Town of Bethlehem.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of the heav'ns.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in.

It won't be easy. Mary was warned that her magnifying of the Lord would be painful – a sword will pierce your own heart too. But nonetheless it is our calling. We follow Mary and Simeon in seeking that we might spiritually depart or at least move over; that God might find a home in us in this New Year. Amen.