

Epiphany 4 Presentation of Jesus at the Temple 29.01.23

Malachi 3:1-5 & Luke 2:22-40. "In celebration of the slow and the small".



The feast of Candlemas today sees us at the halfway point between Christmas and Easter – half looking back, half looking forward. And the readings are looking backwards and forwards too – with Malachi declaring that the Lord is coming, and Luke presenting Mary and Joseph’s obedience to the Law they’ve always known, as they bring their Jewish baby boy to the Temple.

I don’t know if you’ve had a deep dive into the book of Malachi – it was written to call God’s people back to faithfulness after they’d turned away. It’s proper Old Testament, with the usual prophetic call and visions of judgment.

In the passage we heard this morning, there’s the haunting question, made famous in Handel’s *Messiah*, ‘but who may abide the day of his coming?’ The coming of the Lord is seen as an awesome day, and a day of reckoning. The Lord is described as a refiner’s fire and as fullers soap with connotations of purifying and cleansing.

So yes, our first reading is about judgment – judgment against injustice and oppression. Oppression of workers in their wages, judgment for those who don’t care for the poor and the foreigner – all things that sound very current to our ears, in these days of industrial unrest, cost of living crisis, and mass migration of people - all things God cares deeply about.

So that’s Malachi: the messenger, the Messiah, justice, and fire. The Old Testament closes with this great clarion call for the Messiah – and is followed by 400 years of silence.

And then the New Testament begins. And Luke shows us a very different scene. But there are parallels. Mary and Joseph are still operating under Old Testament Law when they bring their firstborn son to be dedicated to God with a small offering of two birds.

Apart from that, though, the contrast couldn’t be greater, between the somewhat bracing tone of Malachi and the new parents coming quietly to the Temple steps. Malachi had written ‘the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple’ but it was probably not a baby that the prophet or his readers had in mind.

But Simeon knew how to read the signs. This great man of prayer has been attentive to the Spirit and over many years has remained faithful to the promise that he would see the Lord's Messiah. Anna too has sensed the much greater arc of salvation that is now unfolding. And Simeon quotes Isaiah, recognising that it's through Jesus that Israel becomes a source of blessing for the nations, which was her original calling.

We see in this scene, in Mary and Joseph offering their small gift and hearing these prophetic words, something new emerging from the old. A re-imagining of the powerful Messiah as an easy-to-miss baby amongst all the other baby boys being brought for dedication.

And there are clues in the language used, that things are being further turned on their head. Simeon says, 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many', and speaks of a sword piercing Mary's heart. With hindsight we know that not everyone welcomed the Lord's Messiah. We know that crucifixion will come before resurrection. The falling before the rising.

And Anna is described as worshipping 'night and day'. One imagines this woman of prayer, who's well into her eighties, keeping vigil even when times are dark. Night and day – not day and night, as the phrase would normally go. If you can keep watch at night, you can be ready for anything.

In this young mother, this older father, this small child and these two elderly prophets we have signs and symbols of a new order. The weak will shame the strong, the first will be last, and the seed will have to die before it bears fruit.

In between writing this sermon, I cleared my head with 10 minutes gardening with some cutting back of woody stems which now were dead. Or at least, the stems were dead (and their ugly black leaves crumpled and drooping) but of course the plants below the soil were still alive. Pruning makes way for new growth. It was satisfying to chop back all the deadwood to make way for the new. Perhaps that's what John, the Lord's messenger, had been doing.

Without pruning, new growth is stunted. The stiff old hollow stems look increasingly out of place; their time has come and gone; they must be pulled up. There's a synergy between the old and new, though. In some cases, if you're not careful with pruning, you can dig up the new growth that's nestling at the base of the old dried-up stuff. Jesus said something about this.

As the Lord's Messiah, Jesus would be formed by the Old Testament whilst pointing to himself as its fulfilment. The relationship of old to new is always important.

I finally got round to reading Katherine May's wonderful book 'Wintering'. In it she uses the winter season as a metaphor for times in our life when we need to withdraw and hibernate – or at least to conserve energy rather than expend it – while we wait for the next season. God was speaking to me, I think.

Taking stock with a view to pruning is a good metaphor for spiritual growth. We probably all need it from time to time. What season are you in? Is it time to take up things, or time to put things down? An important question to ask yourself if you're a seasoned church volunteer, especially as our café opens up finally and we start to see new shoots of growth.

Waiting for God's timing has been one of the hardest lessons I haven't yet learnt! I think of Simeon and Anna, faithfully waiting. I wonder if they had days when they doubted God's timing. Did they look out occasionally at some important leader passing through Jerusalem, and think 'I wonder if that's him?' Who knows what age Simeon was when the Lord's promise came to him? Maybe he'd waited upwards of 30, 40 years?

Timing is everything in church life. Have you noticed how things didn't start back up after Covid with anything like the alacrity we might have wanted? Seeing with the eye of faith what things must die and what things are emerging takes patience. We were in crisis mode for so long that even after we were told it was 'all systems go', many churches (and of course other institutions) are finding some aspects of ministry are for ever changed, and other things are finally re-emerging only now, as we approach the third anniversary of the first lockdown.

So, to reassure us, I think God is gently leading us, while asking us to be gentle with ourselves and with each other. To be compassionate and prayerful. There are lots of hidden Covid scars, particularly in mental and emotional health. Lots of bereavement. Lots of reduced capacity. Organisations we used to look to for support are hardly holding together. Teachers still attest to academic and emotional learning not having taken place for certain cohorts of children. Even our immune systems are taking a while to recover, as we saw at the end of last year.

Luke showcases for us, at Candlemas, the older person, the little baby, the ordinary gift, the Law-abiding parents doing something small, but doing it faithfully. It is enough. You are enough.

May God, who grew inside Mary for nine months to be born into obscurity, give us the patient faith to watch and serve as the future unfolds, in our personal lives and in our corporate life.

Amen.

C. Alcock.