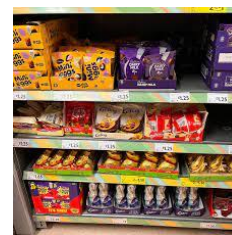


Malachi 3:1-5 & Luke 2:22-40 "Living in God's Time"

SLIDES OF CHRISTMAS ITEMS FOR SALE IN LATE SUMMER AND EASTER ITEMS FOR SALE ON BOXING DAY.



The way that religion marks time and the way the secular world marks time are a bit different. 2020 Covid alternatives aside, we church people prefer to keep it in December. When we see Christmas being promoted in the summer and Easter eggs appearing on Boxing Day, we get a



sense of time being warped, and seasons being stripped of their meaning.

Climate change notwithstanding, we still have a strong sense of the seasons in this country and Christmas is for winter, and Easter is for spring! Although we know it doesn't have much to do with the actual time that Jesus either was born or died, somehow Christmas needs to be in winter, as we put up lights to dispel the darkness, and Easter needs to be in the spring as we celebrate the new life that's emerging from the ground.

If we lived in the Southern hemisphere, this would, of course be entirely different and we'd be having Christmas with our sunglasses on.

Today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas – which developed in the Church as a half-way point between Christmas and Easter. It falls on 2 Feb. but this is the nearest Sunday. Candlemas involved the blessing of candles as a sign that although it was 40 days since Christmas, it was also still 40 days till Easter, and it was still necessary to light candles until the dark finally dissipated in the spring. And that's where we are today – roughly half-way between Christmas and Easter.

That's why, in some churches, Christmas decorations and lights remain until Candlemas. I admit that by about 5th January, as I look around the lounge at the piles of presents still sitting on the floor, the cards covering up a dusty piano and the fairy lights whose batteries died on new year's eve, I'm normally more than ready to clear it all away. I'm caught up in lights and baubles at first, and then my natural de-clutterer takes over.

In this story of the *Presentation of Christ*, Mary and Joseph take their baby to be presented in the Temple, according to Jewish Law. It's a bit like our version of christening, in terms of the child being dedicated to God at a very young age. Simeon and Anna are two elderly faithful Jewish people who had been waiting to see the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, and they'd been waiting a long time.

Here are two people at the end of their lives welcoming someone who's at the beginning of theirs. It's as if time rushes from the past and the future into this one moment of wonder as Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and thanks God for his faithfulness. Simeon had become convinced he wouldn't die until he saw the Lord's Messiah, and now, cradling this baby, he can die in peace. There's something very special about the very old and the very young connecting together.



Before I left my last post in Whitchurch, I did a couple of Christenings for babies in families where there had been a death of an older family member in the very recent past. In both services there was a strong

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sense that the parents of the baby, in wanting to mark the baby's arrival were also very conscious of the presence of the grandparent who hadn't lived to see it. Within this coming together in Christ, we felt connected. Church can be that sort of special place where important connections are made and preserved.

Simeon and Anna have known what it's like to wait. They've organised their lives entirely around this one thing: to wait for the Lord's Messiah; and they've done so, not by getting bored and giving up, but by the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting.

They certainly got their timing right – by having the right inward attitude, they were able to sense the prompting of the Holy Spirit and come into the Temple at just the right moment, and to recognise the Messiah even though they were probably expecting an adult rather than a baby.

How often do we miss God's action in the world due to the wrong attitude? It might have looked from the outside that Simeon and Anna were no longer part of God's plan. Too old to leave the Temple, Anna is certainly well into her 80s and Simeon probably the same. Anna has been a widow so long that her identity is now firmly settled as *God's woman*.

To the Jewish Zealots and Ascetics looking for someone to free God's people, Simeon and Anna must've been completely off the radar. But they are the ones who see with the eye of faith, and they are the ones who can therefore receive and announce God's blessing. They get the timing just right. They're living in God's time, as it were. To live in God's time is to trust that God has gone ahead of you and that God has called you and equipped you to do the things prepared in advance that only you can do.

So, I've been thinking about church life and time. Maybe you've noticed that different expressions of the Christian faith tend to have different relationships to time and they fill it with different things.



Left: "A group of men wearing robes"

Right: "A group of people sitting at tables"



I don't know how these pictures (both of Church) strike you, but there's a certain stillness in the picture of Anglo-Catholic worship – it's a moment of adoration. The priests even have their backs to the people, such is their preoccupation with that moment before God. But perhaps this suggests the limited participation of others as time appears to stand still.

In the café church picture, participation of others looks high; they look engaged, but how easy is it to create a moment of stillness in worship, a moment to slow down as people silently adore the Christ...

Perhaps in this church we're half-way between high participation and action and worshipful moments when time stands still. I think we tend to be activists here – we start up new things and it feels great at the beginning, but hard work several years down the line. But we also value moments of stillness, especially in the Holy Communion, where we become aware of the presence of God in a special way and time slows down.

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The first reading was from the book of Malachi, which, if you didn't know, is one of the last books of the Old Testament, and full of striking images: 'But who can endure the day of his coming?' is a question Malachi asks. In the reading, the life of God's people includes both reverent offering AND social justice; both worship and activism. Yet another Scriptural example of prayer and action held together in the right balance. Contemplation and Action. Action AND contemplation.

I'd like to end by sharing a wish. You might know that I'm taking a Sabbatical this year. The theme is contemplative prayer. The way it goes for me, the way I'm wired up, is mostly towards action. Left to my own devices, I wouldn't have been staying put in the Temple waiting for God's Messiah to show up; I'd have been out and about seeking him in likely places; or alternatively I'd have moved onto a more fruitful project. But I would have missed the moment.

So I need to set aside time for contemplation, and this will provide a big impetus for going deeper in prayer. I'm grateful for the support of the PCC and all of you in this. I think it was Mark who commented that in the first month you can't believe your luck; in the second you get stuck into your reflections and by the third you're questioning your identity. So it will be good for me.

It's not always easy to develop an inner attitude of stillness, silence and waiting prayer because we feel more useful when we're acting. But if we can withdraw, it becomes a virtuous circle: we see what's needed, we act. That leads to more reflection and more prayer and new things open up. And so we act, then pray, then act, then pray. A Sabbatical is a gift – it's a chance to withdraw from ministry in order to refresh, rest and renew, and come back with different eyes. When did you last take a day, or even an hour, to stop and look again at your life? A danger with active volunteers is the temptation to become wholly identified with your role.

There are so many times in ministry when I'd like to stop all the activities and just BE as a church family. When most of the work that sustains a church is being run by volunteers, you get into a situation where most conversations are about 'the work', and there's often not time to ask more important questions like 'how are you? How is your soul?' There are so many times when I have to plunge into operational mode: 'have you remembered this? Have we sent this off; when's the deadline?' and afterwards I think about the person who's working hard at being a good Christian and I think: what a wonderful person, I didn't have time to savour them and celebrate them, because x, y and z needed doing ASAP.

(x, y and z are usually something to do with form filling; safeguarding compliance; dealing with new initiatives; advertising ourselves; maintaining the fabric of the building; liaising with the Police on anti-social behaviour; responding to the neighbourhood and keeping up to speed with the law, with education; with the climate response and with the news.)

I sometimes think 'when this project is over, when this mini crisis is passed, we'll have time to be, to celebrate each other, to find out more about what makes each other tick'. But I realised with sadness (a while ago) that the stopping never happens for long enough - if it happens at all. There's never going to be a 'when all this is finished...' moment, because there'll always be more things to do.

This makes me sad. I offer this wish to you – the wish to stop squeezing too much activity into too little time - a particular temptation for some of us – and I ask for your prayers and wisdom. How can we be a church where there is enough time? How can we be a church living in God's time? How can we be a church with space to BE.

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Amen.