

## **The Presentation of Christ in the Temple January 29<sup>th</sup> 2012 Canon Robert Innes**

Today is an occasion of celebration as we meet to give thanks for the birth of baby Joshua. It is a great pleasure to welcome the families of Lucy and Jonathan to Brussels and to our church. I well recall the time just over four years ago when we gathered for Lucy and Jonathan's wedding. Today we celebrate the fruit of their union, a much desired and longed for baby son. In our service we have sought God's blessing on your baby, parents and sponsors have promised to care for him, and Joshua has proudly been presented to the whole church for us also to pledge our support for him.

What we have done today, bears some similarities to the event described in our gospel reading, the presentation of Christ in the temple - and the theme of our service today. Mary and Joseph come to the temple to do for their new baby what is right according to the law of the Lord. Mary is a Jewish mother. According to the traditions of her time, she was ritually unclean for 40 days after the birth, and so she goes to the temple to make the sacrifice which will enact her purification – a pair of doves or two young pigeons. What is more, Jesus, like baby Joshua, is a first born son. Under the law, he can be required to be devoted to temple service...and the young parents are supposed to pay a special temple tax of 5 shekels to release him from this obligation. And so Mary and Joseph go to the temple to fulfil the rituals expected of them.

We might first consider Mary, the baby's mother. This was her first outing with her new baby. We can imagine her feelings of pride and nervousness as she takes her firstborn into the public square for the very first time. Childbirth in those days was dangerous both for the mother and the baby, and infant mortality rates were high. Maybe some of us have watched the BBC television drama 'call the midwife'. It portrays vividly the pain, suffering and danger that accompanied childbirth in poorer communities in the East End of London in the 1950s, not long ago. Back in the first century there were no painkillers and no antibiotics. So it would be with a real sense of thanksgiving for a safe delivery that Mary goes to the temple that morning.

Joseph the Father accompanies his wife Mary, and Jesus the baby whom he has adopted. In this episode, Mary and Joseph are presented as good, faithful and devoted parents. We read that when the parents had done everything required for them by the law they returned home to Nazareth. And there, in his parents' care, Jesus grew and became strong. The way the gospel writers tell it, by far the main role of both Joseph and Mary in life is to care for their son. What do we know about Joseph? That he was a carpenter. Yes. But do we know what exactly he made? No. Was he a man of high reputation in his town? We don't know. Was he famous for his wisdom and insight? Probably not. But what we are told is that under his and Mary's care the boy Jesus grew and became strong.

Babies and children demand a great deal of time and attention – at least, in my experience, for the first 20 years or so. The care of children is a blessing and a joy, but it does restrict our freedom and it does close down certain options in life. I have to say, I know a number of folk, even ordained ministers, who have pursued vocations that haven't weighted fully enough the need of the children for stability and security. Jesus is why Joseph and Mary are still remembered; he was their major life work. And to some extent that must be the case for all of us who are parents. Yet I don't suppose

Mary and Joseph regretted it. I don't suppose that Joseph went to his grave saying: "what could I have become?...if only I had spent more time at the workbench!"

The central character in the story is the baby. He is entirely passive, of course – he is only 40 days old, but it is him that St. Luke's spotlights. And I am struck by the remarkable way in which this baby's birth interweaves the ordinary and the extraordinary. It is, really, the same for every birth. Nothing could be more natural than being born! Those of us in church today are different from one another in very many ways, but one thing we all have in common is the experience of birth. None of us was carried into this world in a hammock carried by a stork. None of us was found under a gooseberry bush. Each of us was born of a human mother, and nothing could be more standard than that. Yet on the other hand, every birth is a miracle. Every birth is unique. We have had many babies born in our church community over the last year. And the experience of birth, new parenthood and the rituals that surround it affect each mother and father deeply and differently.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews stresses how similar Jesus is to us. "He shared our flesh and blood...he was made like us in every way." That is how Jesus can know and sympathise with and share our human experience: he shared our ordinary human experience from birth to death. And yet, in this ordinary account of a human birth, there are extraordinary themes. He is given the name Jesus, in accordance with the instructions of the angel Gabriel. The Holy Spirit is at work to bring his young life into conjunction with aged Simeon and Anna. And remarkable words that fulfil ancient prophecy will then be spoken over him..

So faithful parents, Mary and Joseph took their little baby into the vast open spaces of the Jerusalem Temple. And there they met the old man Simeon. Let us think for a moment about him. He is described as being "righteous and devout". The word devout means "careful" – this was a gentleman who was exemplary in keeping the religious law. Now we might think, that was a pretty boring kind of life, but in fact it was rather significant and remarkable, especially given the conditions of the time. For we recall, that Israel was under occupation. Roman soldiers patrolled the streets of Jerusalem. And the Roman Antonia Fortress looked down on the temple courts as a continuous reminder of occupying power.

I am reading at the moment the magnificent novel by Hugo Claus, "The Sorrow of Belgium". The book gives a compelling but grotesque picture of an adolescent boy called Louis growing up in Flanders under war-time occupation. Life gets steadily tougher for Louis and his family as buildings are bombed, normal life is disrupted and the quality of the food gets relentlessly worse and worse. Some Flemings join the White Brigade and resist...shadowy figures stabbing occupying soldiers in the back at night time. Others, like Louis's own parents collaborate with the occupiers, to get food, to prevent their relatives being conscripted into the army. The Sorrow of Belgium describes a world where corruption was rampant but necessary. It's a powerful account of what occupation does to people.

This is the sort of context in which Simeon lives. He copes with it by turning to God. He was waiting, says St. Luke, for the consolation or the *liberation* of his beloved Israel. Rather than resisting or collaborating he was waiting upon God to act. No doubt his religious observance was a powerful antidote to the corruption which

occupation carried with it. When Simeon saw this little baby he knew unmistakably that Israel's salvation was near. And he knew equally clearly that his own time on earth was drawing to a close. And so as the parents hand over their little baby to Simeon, he similarly hands himself over to God, and says those famous and familiar words: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

It is an extraordinarily moving and poignant moment. The time for which Simeon has long been waiting has arrived. The baby he has so much desired has been born. And what does he say? "Lord your word has been fulfilled, now let me depart in peace." Simeon has done what God has required of him, and he now feels able to hand over his life to God and to depart. Simeon lets go of the baby into the arms of its mother, and lets go of himself into the arms of God.

But this is the story of four adults and a baby. And we should briefly consider the fourth adult, the aged Anna, the widow who apparently never left the temple but worshipped there night and day, fasting and praying. And we recognise, in her, the widows one sometimes encounters today in southern European countries, clad in black, sitting alone in the pews of cathedrals and churches. Luke's presentation of Anna is respectful and admiring. He does not give the impression that Anna is odd or pitiable. In her society great age was a mark of honour...and the ability to live as a widow to a great age was particularly esteemed. Her religious devotion is a mark of spiritual discipline, preserving her, no doubt, from depression or self-pity or cynicism. And her role is to join Simeon in expressing thanks to God that the long-awaited Saviour has at last been born.

The infant Jesus, his young parents Mary and Joseph, and the elderly Simeon and Anna: four adults and a baby come together in an apparently chance, though in fact divinely ordained meeting in the temple. And out of this meeting comes the decisive revelation of who Jesus really is: *he is a light to enlighten all the peoples of the whole world*, he is to be the saviour of all people, and he will be the glory of his own people Israel.

I wonder when you suppose the celebration of Christmas finishes? Does it end with the arrival of the shepherds at the manger? Or at Epiphany with the arrival of the wise men? Or when the coloured street lights have been taken down and the New Year credit card bills paid off? According to St. Luke the Christmas story ends when Jesus is presented in the temple. And that, actually, makes for a surprisingly powerful conclusion. For when the infant Jesus is received in the arms of the senior man Simeon, then the joy of the new birth is combined with the reality of human ageing, and the hope of infancy is combined with the sorrow and foretelling of dying. It is at this point that the identity of the Christ child is made manifest and his glory is revealed.

As he holds the baby in his arms, Simeon blesses Jesus, and he says, "this child is destined to cause the rising and the falling of many and to be a sign that is spoken against." And then to Mother Mary "and a sword will pierce your own soul too". What a solemn and awesome thing to say over a new born baby. Did Simeon realise how much trouble and conflict Jesus was going to bring? Should we hear a reference to the Roman soldier piercing the side of Jesus as he hung on the cross?

I'm sure that Simeon could not have realised just how true his words were. He could not have known, as they stood in that busy temple courtyard, that 70 years later Roman soldiers would have razed it stone by stone to the ground. He could not have known that the animal sacrifices going on all around him would cease. He could not have known that the child he carried in his arms was to be the one, final, atoning sacrifice for the sins and sorrows of the whole world.

But we do know that. And as we reflect on Luke chapter 2 now, we must again marvel at the joy and the tragedy contained within such a few verses. Seldom have birth and death been so closely mingled together. And almost nowhere else in scripture is the meaning of the incarnation portrayed with such power.

And so our worship today gives us one last opportunity to look back to Christmas before we look forward to Lent. We have gathered today to give thanks for the birth of Joshua and to celebrate all the hope and potential represented by his young life. So also we reflect again on the birth of the Christ child: the one on whom the hopes and fears of all the years are laid. As we start to look forward to Lent, we ponder on this moving and lovely picture: the proud young mother, with her little baby, the aged Simeon and Anna, this divinely ordained encounter with its declaration of glory and its words of self-surrender. And perhaps we might be able to make our own, and say from our own experience, those words of St. John: "Yes, we have beheld his glory, the glory of the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth."