

Sunday 29th January 2017 (Presentation of Christ)

St Faith, Havant

8.00am – Mass & 9.30am – Parish Mass

Malachi 3.1-5; Hebrews 2.14-end; St Luke 2.22-40

Today, on the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also known as Candlemas, we reach the end of the church's celebrations of Christmas – for this year, at least. These two great feasts, of Christmas and Candlemas, bookend a season which has two overarching themes. One is the incarnation, the Word made flesh, God-with-us as a human on earth. The second theme, which I'd like us to think about for a few moments now, is that the extraordinary can be found in and through the ordinary.

There's a risk in our keeping of the Christmas season that we get so caught up in the extraordinary of the stories that we miss how ordinary much of what happens actually is. So let's think back over some of the stories we've had in the last few weeks.

Christmas – angels, a virgin birth, a baby in a manger. But Mary and Joseph were an ordinary Jewish couple before Mary learned she was pregnant with Jesus. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was because *all* the world was being registered in their home town, so there were thousands of people making equivalent journeys, and I bet Mary wasn't the only one who was pregnant.

The visit of the Magi. Well, if they recognised God incarnate in that infant, they got far more than they bargained for. But remember, they had come to visit a new-born king. That's why they had made the journey – and in the absence of modern communications, they pretty much had to come themselves, or decide they were wrong about the star in the sky and stay at home. Yes the gifts are highly symbolic and quite impractical for an infant, but they weren't meant to be baby presents. They were royal offerings.

Or last week's story, of the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Amid all the wonder that these fishermen would immediately abandon their nets when Jesus called, let's remember that Jesus was far from the first itinerant rabbi to attract followers in Palestine, and he wouldn't be the last. Of course, and thankfully for the Palestinian economy, most people stayed in one place doing their normal jobs. But a Jewish teacher wandering the country with a rag-tag band of followers was not unusual.

I'm not trying to turn these stories into something they are not. They aren't, in the original description of a famous long-running BBC radio soap, 'everyday stories of country folk'. These are extraordinary stories. But if we make all the ordinary stuff about them seem extraordinary, we miss the thing that is actually extraordinary – the encounter with God in human flesh.

So it is with our story today. We can easily get caught up in the drama – Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus, simple folk from Nazareth in the great temple at Jerusalem – and forget that it was quite ordinary. As our reading points out, every Jewish couple came to the temple with their firstborn son. It might have been a bit overwhelming for Mary and Joseph, but the temple staff would have seen hundreds, thousands, of new families just like them, and were probably quite used to helping them through the process. What they were doing was completely ordinary.

And into this ordinary religious observance God breathes the extraordinary. The man Simeon who recognised that this was the promised Messiah he had been waiting for. The elderly prophet Anna who realised that this was a special child, whom other people needed to know about. And Mary and Joseph, despite all that has already happened to them, still amazed at what was being said about Jesus. The routine presentation of a first-born Jewish boy in the temple turned into an amazing revelation of God's light and God's glory. The extraordinary being found in the ordinary.

In our own lives, we cannot spend all our time waiting and striving only for the extraordinary. We cannot spend all of every day trying to manufacture the special. We should not spend so much time looking for God in unusual places and things and experiences, that we miss him breaking into the routine, the

everyday, the mundane. For God is present in these things just as much as in the heightened intense moments; that's what the Christmas season reminds us every year. God, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us today, shares our flesh and blood and became like us. The ordinariness of humanity and the extraordinariness of divinity held inseparably together. And because we know that God is present in our ordinariness, we never know when God will transform our ordinary days into extraordinary ones.

So today, as our Christmas celebrations conclude, and as our minds and hearts drift towards Lent and Easter, let's give thanks that God is also in what happens between the highlights. He is there in the ordinary. The church even has a name for what happens between the highlights – it's called 'Ordinary Time': we'll see it marked next week by green vestments and a green altar frontal. Our God is God of and for the everyday, not just the special occasion.

Let's give thanks and commit ourselves afresh to really engaging with those things which can sometimes seem routine, or just a bit boring. Because it's in those things where God can show up in a special way. Mary and Joseph were quietly getting on with planning a life together when they found out Mary was to give birth to Christ. It was the normal processes of astronomy and international diplomacy that led the Magi to look upon the face of the Word made flesh. Peter, Andrew, James, and John,

met with God having turned up for work just like every other day. And it was in the expected pattern of religious duty that Mary and Joseph presented their son at the temple, and Simeon suddenly knew that he had seen God's salvation, the light for the Gentiles.

God is there in and through the ordinary things of our lives – in our family life, in civic dealings, in our work responsibilities and our leisure time, and in our church commitments too. Sometimes we may not particularly notice him, but he is there sharing in all the same things that we do. So let's embrace them and commit to them. And if, like Simeon and Anna, we stay alert and open to God's prompting, then we can find him, and he may just transform our human ordinary into his divine extraordinary.