

## Presentation of the Lord 2020 Havant

*Mal.3.1-5 / Heb 2.14-.18 / Lk 2.22-40*

We have just heard one of the loveliest few verses in the Bible, the song of Simeon, the old man who welcomed Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to God in the Temple, *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace*. For over 1500 years this song, the *Nunc dimittis*, has been sung at evening prayer, originally only in monasteries, but in recent centuries by everyone who has taken part in the daily prayer of the Church of England and particularly by all members of the clergy for whom it is a daily obligation. It is also of course often used at funerals because of its quiet confidence that in Jesus God has kept his promise to offer salvation to all.

As you know Fr Tom is always reminding us to take context seriously, so let me set the scene a little.

The key moments in Old Testament history had all been about God saving his people: think of Noah and his ark, of how God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, then much later how he brought them back from exile in Babylon.

All through the centuries the memory of these great events had sustained the hope of the Jewish people, despite repeated calamities. Invader after invader had desecrated the holy places. By the time of Jesus, it was the Roman Empire that was in control.

Every time the Holy Land had been attacked, there had been who threw their lot in with the powers-that-be and accept their values. Some thought it best to work with the invaders and try to improve things little by little. Others favoured violence.

There was however yet another group: the Bible calls them the humble, poor or little people: they didn't raise their voices, nor did they compromise with the powers that be; rather they trusted that God really is the ultimate driving force of history and that, come what may, he will eventually act to deliver his people. It seems that Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna all belonged to this group. Ignored by the mighty and despised by the activists, they waited patiently because they knew that in the end God would fulfil his promise in his own way and in his own time.

One of the ways the old prophets had predicted that this would happen was in the words we heard in this morning's first reading: *The Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter his Temple.* The Temple was not only a place of worship, but the symbol of God's presence in the world.

So you would expect the Lord's arrival in the Temple as in the world to be accompanied by unmistakable signs of power. But today tells us how that Lord entered his Temple as he entered his world. Not with unmistakable signs of power, but as a helpless baby, the child of obscure provincial parents, members of an overlooked and despised class.

How different the reality from the expectation! It's not surprising that as St John puts it "*He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.*" But Simeon and Anna, equally obscure and unimportant, recognised him, received him.

There is something very appealing and attractive about this scene. Something else needs to be said, however. Simeon and Anna were not the first people to recognise Jesus as God in the world - remember Mary's cousin Elizabeth and her unborn child, John the Baptist, then there were the rough and ready Jewish shepherds and then the learned pagan wise men.

So by the time Jesus was brought to the Temple, he had already been acknowledged by both Jews and Gentiles - to fulfil God's promise to reveal his glory to the whole world.

People of every different sort, nation and religious background are offered the chance to welcome Christ. It won't do to say, *I am only a poor shepherd*, or *I am a foreigner and a pagan*: they too were brought to worship at the manger. Nor does quiet, simple and humble piety have any advantage. Shepherds, wise men, Temple devotees - all discovered in Jesus Christ the one who fulfils all their hopes, even those of which they had been completely unaware.

You may have been either interested or bored to hear this explanation of what lies behind today's celebration. But I now want to put you on the spot. St Paul wrote to his converts in Corinth, "*Do you not know that you are God's temple?*"

Most of us either think we are unworthy to receive Christ, presented to the Temple of our own souls and bodies, or perhaps that we are only too worthy to do so.

The wonderful series of disclosures that have been unfolded over the past five weeks or so shows how wrong our assumptions have been. Today, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple, to the temple which is you. Here in that temple you are invited to worship him, not in pious words and warm religious feelings, but in lives transformed by his presence. The very diversity of those earliest worshippers, the shepherds, the wise men and the humble poor, tells us that none are excluded from that invitation and that challenge.

The only question for each of us at Candlemas is whether we are willing to receive him and to live accordingly.

