



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 4 February 2024

Celebrating Candlemas

Curate Lisa will preach at St Johns

Today, 40 days after Christmas we celebrate the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple or Candlemas, the last feast of Christmas. At this pivotal moment of the year, half way between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, the church looks back to the birth of Christ and forward to his Passion, echoing the bitter-sweet message that Simeon gave to Mary.

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him (Luke 22.33)

An illustration to set the scene

Chatting with my nine-year-old grandson recently, he threw in the aside, 'When I go to university, Grandma...' He had no sense that there was anything out of the ordinary about this expectation, but I couldn't help but think how it would have been inconceivable for me to have said that at his age and how it would still not be a remark found on the lips of some children today.

Putting aside whether university should be the pinnacle of achievement or indeed whether it brings the benefits it once did, Arthur's casual remark raises issues about the expectations held of and by young children and how these are formed by generation, culture, class and other factors. Why, for example, are white boys from low income households the group least likely to go to university in Britain today?

Today's Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel, which we heard also on the first Sunday after Christmas, we see how different characters vested their expectations in the child Jesus.

First, his parents. They bring him to the Temple with the required sacrifice to dedicate him to God. This is their firstborn boy, and they are dedicating him to the Lord. They are engaging in the expected religious rituals, suggesting that this child will be brought up as a faithful Jew. They seem not to be prepared for the prophecies about to be made over him, as Luke records that they are astounded at what they hear.

The righteous Simeon, described by one author as 'an old man carrying a vast hope', comes to his encounter with the child Jesus with the assurance that God's promises to Israel will one day be fulfilled. Inspired by the Holy Spirit he acknowledges Jesus as the expected Messiah whom he and the whole of Israel has been waiting for. Simeon can now die in peace because, he declares, he has seen the one who will not only redeem Israel, but the whole world. As his light dims, the light of the world has been lit.

But for Mary, the child's mother, he has a poignant message. The emotional import of it can be strongly felt, even if what it means was more obscure:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of

many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'
(Luke 22.34-5)

As well as hope for a great future for her son, Mary is warned of risk and heartache. Jesus will be a cause for disruption as well as revelation and her heart will be sliced in two, as with a sword.

The prophetess Anna also pronounces to those around about the significance of Jesus for the salvation of Israel. Jesus' destiny is being portrayed in terms that people would have made sense of from the prophets they heard read, like Malachi who foretold,

the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple (Malachi 3.1)

And let's spell out the full nature of that expectation. It is that Jesus will be the refiner's fire that at the end of time will be the judge of all.

The public and private, the cosmic and the personal are intertwined in the story. The child bears the weight of expectation, not only of the Jewish people, but of the all people throughout time. And what a relief at the end of all this, that his parents just take him home to bring him up as best they can, and he becomes strong and wise and favoured by God.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Who has not looked at a new baby and wondered what life holds for them and what they will become?

The expectations we have for children can significantly shape their lives. Elderly parents of children born with Down's Syndrome will say that they were told their child would never speak or come to anything, that they would be best putting them into an institution, forgetting them and having another child. Few forgot and some refused to believe what they were told. Young children with Down's today will be expected to go to school and achieve their potential.

The opposite of this experience is what's called the Pygmalion effect. In one study researchers identified a random group of students but told their teachers that they had been found to be potential high achievers. At the end of the year these students had performed better than their peers. The teachers expected more – and they got more.

When parents brought their firstborn Jewish child to the Temple, they were recognising that each child belongs to God. Each of us has the potential from birth to unfold as a child of God. That involves living as well as we can – but, like Simeon - in a state of expectation for a destiny that is much bigger than our own. As one of the possible prayers for the newly baptised puts it:

Holy God, your grace has appeared, bringing salvation to all. Help us, your people, to live lives that are upright and godly, while we wait for the manifestation of the glory of our God and Saviour, through him who gave himself for us that he might make us a people of his own. Amen.

Expectations may predict the likely life chances of a young person, but as Christians we know that the path to fulfilment or disappointment is not inevitable. The Holy Spirit, working through God's servants can interrupt the cycle. As we wait for the coming of Spring, we remember that as Hannah and Mary proclaimed, God's Kingdom upends human order. And we on whom the light has dawned can play our own part in making sure that no human being's life chances are determined purely by the circumstances of their birth.

At Candlemas it is the church's tradition to bless the candles to be used in the year. I light one now on our behalf for all the young people who feel they have not lived up to the expectations upon them or who have not yet had anyone in their lives who believes in their potential. I pray that someone, whether a teacher, a youth

worker or, or indeed an older person will see something in them that no one else has appreciated, and so instil the self-belief that will enable that young person to defy adverse life chances and fulfil their potential.

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him (Luke 22.33)

The Rector will preach at St Margarets:-

In today's worship we celebrate the humble people of faith who recognised the child Jesus as Messiah and declared his glory to the world. Like them, we accept our calling to make God visible to those in whose lives we have a small part.

"For my eyes have seen your salvation." Luke 2:30

An illustration to set the scene

Romeo and Juliet, the play by William Shakespeare, tells the story of two young lovers from feuding families, who marry in secret.

As well as the main characters, there are a number of smaller "**bit parts**" – characters who are on the sidelines of the action but whose interventions nevertheless have an impact on the story.

One of these is Friar Laurence, the priest who marries the couple.

He is also responsible for the idea of giving Juliet a sleeping draught that will make her appear dead, getting her out of an unwelcome marriage to a suitor chosen by her

family, and giving the banished Romeo time to come back and claim her.

This sets in motion a chain of events which turns a love story into a tragedy, as the friar's message telling Romeo about the plan is delayed because of an outbreak of plague, and Romeo only hears the official version of events, which is that Juliet is dead.

Armed with a phial of poison, he breaks into her tomb and kills himself, and when Juliet wakes up and finds her husband's body, she kills herself with his dagger.

Friar Laurence might not be the "leading man" in the play, but his actions shape the outcome of the story.

Today's Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel we encounter two bit-part players in the story of Jesus' life.

They are both old, neither is powerful or rich or important, but their lives have been focused on God for decades – they have both acquired the habit of waiting on God.

The Holy Spirit, we are told, rests on Simeon, and Anna is a prophet.

Both are attentive to signs of God's presence in the world.

On this particular day, a day like any other, a couple bring their newborn son to the Temple to fulfil the religious

observance of thanksgiving and dedication common to all firstborn males in his culture.

There are other families – dozens, maybe more – doing the same.

But, as Simeon and Anna realise, this baby is different. This is who they have been waiting for.

Simeon can die happy.

Between them, Anna and Simeon recognise and declare this baby to be the Messiah, who will be the Saviour of all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

This is the plot twist, the insight that takes what happens on that day in Jerusalem in a whole different direction.

From here onwards, Jesus ceases to be simply a baby at the centre of a family ceremony, but becomes the Messiah who will restore God's creation, whose coming has been prophesied and eagerly awaited by the faithful.

Jesus' saving work, which will culminate in the crucifixion and resurrection, begins here with these two minor characters recognising God incarnate in the baby before them. From here on, this story will change the world.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Let us be open and receptive to the people who have bit parts in our lives.

Many of us will have points – plot twists – where our own faith stories changed direction as a result of something someone said or did.

The steadfast faith of the grandparent who introduced us to church at a young age, or the chance encounter that made us question our assumptions, or the hand of friendship extended in challenging times.

People who, like Anna and Simeon, shared their insights and showed us what really matters in life.

We, too, are called to be the bit players in the lives of those around us, to be the people who show others the world through different lenses, and bring a new perspective.

We are called to be the people who recognise God at work in the world, in the small things – a new baby, perhaps, or a family celebration of a rite of passage.

People who, by our example, our prophetic voice, and our recognition of the holy, can create a plot twist, something which changes the direction of the story completely.

We may not be archbishops or celebrities or social media influencers, but we all have minor roles in the life stories of those around us, and what we do in those roles can have an impact on their lives in ways we could never imagine.

*"For my eyes have seen your salvation."
Luke 2:30*

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