

# The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple 2015

St Marylebone 8.30 am and 11 am

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

At the end of T S Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, the unnamed narrator stops recounting his tale of the Magi's long and arduous journey to Bethlehem and begins to reflect on what it all might have meant:

All this [the journey to Bethlehem, he ponders] was a  
long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again,  
but set down This -  
set down This:

were we led all that way for Birth or Death?

There was a Birth, certainly -  
We had evidence and no doubt.

I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different;  
this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us,  
like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With  
an alien people clutching their gods.

I should be glad of another death.

In his encounter with the Christ Child, yes, the  
unnamed Magus *discovered* birth, but he *discerned* death.

Not for him the unalloyed joy of a new baby, full of  
happy promise with a world of endless possibilities  
spreading out far into the future.

What he saw in this particular birth, was birth which  
was, somehow, painfully, and somehow inextricably,  
linked to death, and not just this particular child's  
inevitable death as a human being, but a death which  
would be unlike any other death, a death which would  
mark the end of one dispensation and the inauguration  
of something new, unknown.

At the culmination of their journeying to Bethlehem, the  
Magi had encountered not just a new 'King of the Jews'  
but something much greater, something much more  
mysterious and deeply profound, something of the  
most immense magnitude which would change the

universe, something which, once discerned, could not but change them and everything they were to look on ever again.

Today, as we bring Christmas to its close, on this great Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, we encounter Simeon and Anna and they too, like the Magi, before them, *discover* not only a birth but *discern* death in the child whom they hold in their arms.

Simeon and Anna, know instinctively – after lifetimes of watching and waiting - that the child brought to the Temple by Mary and Joseph is the end of the old dispensation, that here is the One, in whom and through whom and by whom, all that is new will come to be.

Simeon and Anna know, without any shadow of a doubt, without any hesitation or reserve, that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the long-promised One, the One who will bring glory to God's people Israel, and who will enlighten the Gentiles by bringing God's revelation to all people, all people everywhere and in all time, not only to the people of the ancient Covenant to which they belong and give witness.

But, like the Magi, Simeon and Anna's encounter with the Christ child, is one of anything but unalloyed joy; they too see that in embracing this tiny 40 day-old child, that they are embracing Death as well as Birth; the end of something as well as the beginnings of something breathtakingly new.

No wonder they talk of this child in terms of a 'sword' that will pierce the souls he touches to their very essence!

In the way that Christmas is celebrated today; in the way that so much of contemporary Christianity is packaged and manipulated and and sold, it can be all too easy to see the joy and the hope and the promise of Christ's birth, but well-nigh impossible to see anything of the death and struggle or confusion and doubt glimpsed in the discernment of the Magi and Simeon and Anna.

We too, can be all too content to stick with the sentiment of the pre-packaged Christmas of nativity plays with their extra-terrestrial lobsters and winsome angels.

We see the shepherds hurrying to the manger, at the prompting of the angelic host, but we rarely, if ever,

reflect that the shepherds hurry from their sheep to the manger, in which lies the very Lamb of God, the One whose inevitable sacrifice will take away the sin of the world.

We are happy to see the Magi, the three kings from 'Orientar' riding their camels to Bethlehem, swathed in silks and jewels, but not so happy to have to stop midst pudding and crackers to reflect on their preposterous gifts which speak so volubly about the kingly child's impending sacrificial death.

Simon and Anna welcome the child Jesus into the precincts of the Temple they love, the place which testifies above all others to the Lord's covenant with his people Israel, but they discern, immediately, that this child's birth - and death - and death will render everything they have known and loved null and void.

Forty days after his birth, Mary and Joseph come to sacrifice two turtle doves to redeem their child, Jesus, yet, it is this first-born son of theirs, who will, through the sacrifice of himself, come to redeem all that is, seen and unseen for all eternity.

So, as we end Christmas and turn our eyes towards the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb of Easter, may the

prayers of Simeon and Anna, of Mary and Joseph, of the Shepherds and the Magi lead us not only to discover Jesus in the midst of our lives, but to discern him as God's Way, and Truth and Life, the Light who enlightens the Gentiles and who gives glory to God's people Israel, the Great Little One whose birth leads to the death which alone gives life.

There was a Birth, certainly -  
We had evidence and no doubt.

I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different

Amen.