



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas) 2019

8.30 am & 11 am

In the Prologue to the Gospel which bears his name, St John writes that Jesus is life and light and that nothing that has been created can overpower or overwhelm that lightⁱ.

Today, 40 days after his birth, Jesus is brought to the Temple and is welcomed by Simeon and Anna, two elderly people who embody the long, long history of men and women, sustained by a prophecy hope, who strain to glimpse the light; two elderly people who stand for the countless men and women to whom the Holy Spirit spoke God's promises down through the ages.

But that hope was mingled with fear.

Yes, the Lord would come to His Temple - one day - but who could endure the day of that coming? - for the Lord would come in judgment and retribution and would, like a refiner's fireⁱⁱ, burn away all the impurities that humanity had adopted through the millenniums to keep God at a safe, untroublesome, distance.

Well, today the Lord comes to his Temple, but not at the head of an army of occupation, not as a fearsome and harsh judge, not with terrifying-but-cleansing fire, but as a six-week old baby, happy to be cradled in the outstretched arms of an old woman

and an old man who have been waiting and watching all their lives for the ancient prophecies to be fulfilled; an old man and an old woman who have, in humility and with patience, followed every letter of the Jewish Law in order that they might, just might, live long enough to see the Law completed in all its fullness before they die.

Simeon's and Anna's faithfulness is rewarded in their encounter with the Lord who comes to His Temple; they see the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Light who enlightens everyone and everything: Jesus, whose very name means the 'Lord whose presence is Salvation'; the Great Little One who has stooped heaven to earth and who now lifts earth to heavenⁱⁱⁱ; he who is both Eternal Wisdom and God's beloved child^{iv}, the One in whom and by whom all things have come into being and now through whom makes all things are being made new.

Rather than taking control of the situation and exercising divine power in his long-promised coming, God places himself into the hands of his creation. It is a risky enterprise: it lies in the power of Simeon and Anna to smother the child, to reject him, but instead they embrace him and God smiles at them and at the whole of creation seen and unseen.

The days will come, of course, when the child will be rejected - and killed - but now is the moment when God's judgment on creation is exercised and recognised by Simeon and Anna not as violent power or brute force, nor as bitter retribution and harsh judgment, but as mercy and love and life and light expressed as God turns his face towards creation and his people in the gurgling smile of a small child.

Very soon, we shall be invited to reach out our hands to receive the Christ Child, the gift God keeps on offering to his Creation, in the form of bread and wine.

In the smile of the Christ child, the God the Father invites us to come out from the shadows of our making and step assuredly into his light; to risk life-giving exposure bathed in his light, rather hide or seek refuge in the soul-destroying life-limiting darkness of our own making.

Christ is both the Light which invites and draws us into the divine heart of all Love and the light by which and in which we can see things for what they really are, see ourselves for who we really are.

In the Temple, in the arms of Simeon and Anna, Christ is recognised as the Light who reveals God's everlasting mercy and gentle forgiveness in the shadows of guilt and shame; the Light who reveals presence and courage in the night of our fear; the Light who reveals compassion and hope in the black sucking-vortices of sorrow and loss; the Light who reveals the way forward in the blindness of ignorance and confusion and prejudice and fear; the Light who reveals life in the seemingly utter destructive darkness of death.

The living Light of God's Love consumes our darkness, fills us, and frees us to go in peace just as God promised.

With Simeon and Anna may *we* see God's salvation, leave the shadows of death behind and embrace the Light - and may Simeon's song become our song.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace

according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.^v

Amen.

i John 1.4-6

ii q.v. Malachi 3

iii q.v. Richard Crashaw, *In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord*

iv Proverbs 8:30

v Nunc dimitis, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662