

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Presentation of Christ in the Temple**  
**Sunday, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020**

**Malachi 3-4**  
**Hebrews 2:14-18**  
**Luke 2:22-40**  
**Psalm 84**

I grew up in a mining village outside Edinburgh in Scotland, and, as a boy, I knew an old man there who had served in the First World War. He was the older of two brothers. His younger brother had not been old enough to go, so he went off on his own. Unbeknownst to him, shortly after he had gone to France, his little brother went to the recruiting office, lied about his age and joined another Regiment bound for France. Sometime later, the younger brother was sent on an errand through the trenches to get some butter for the company cook. On his way through the mud and men he bumped into none other than his older brother. The chances of this were of course a million to one. A classic encounter then took place between two Scottish soldiers. (Now you have to understand that regardless of the momentousness of an occasion Scottish working men are not prone to great outpourings of emotion. Indeed when they introduced the Peace in the liturgy in Scotland the rubric read something like “The people will now greet each other in the accustomed manner” – in Europe that might mean embracing one another and kissing – in this part of the world it might mean a smile and the shaking of hands, but where I come from it would be more likely to be a slight nod of the head and a grunted “Ai” - definitely no smiling or touching anyway! ) The older brother, who of course, had no idea that his younger brother was in France at all, said “What are you dain here?” - “I’m looking for butter” “Common I’ll get you some butter.” Such is the stuff that emotional and extraordinary events are made of where I grew up!

Now in their defence, I think our reactions to extraordinary things can often be extremely ordinary. I remember being involved in quite a bad car accident where I saw a car pull out in front of me and a queue of traffic at night and in a split second I had swerved hit a car, been hit by another and spun round to come to a stop in the middle of the duel carriageway facing the wrong way in the dark. My first thoughts on finding myself in this extraordinary and dangerous situation? “I had better turn the radio off!” That was my first concern – not my or anybody else’s physical safety!

The extraordinary and the incredibly ordinary are mixed up together.

What we celebrate today has something of the same quality about it. The Gospel describes the Holy Family going up to Jerusalem to perform the ordinary observances of their people. After being circumcised, the next stage for Jesus and his parents was to go to the temple after the 40 day period. There the boy child had to be presented to the priests and, because he was the first born, he had to be redeemed by the payment of a small sum of money. This comes from Exodus 13.2 where the first born of both man and beast is said to belong to God. Mary and Joseph had literally to buy him back from God. This may seem strange to us, but in fact it represented something very important and true – that every life is a gift from God. Children do not belong to their parents. They are given as a gift to us to be honoured. And having seen my own children off at many airports heading off to school or different parts of the world I have often had to face the fact that we are only a part of their destinies, bystanders who can only wave and sometimes, cheer.

The 40-day period referred to the time a woman was considered to be ritually unclean after bearing a child. She was at a remove from public and religious life during those days. Mary had come to make the sacrifice of two pigeons to signify that this period was over and that she could now return to normal life –and could now go to the temple or the synagogue. This again seems very strange to us. And yet if you look at the first American Prayer Book of 1789 you will see a service called the Churching of Women which fulfils the same purpose. The idea that bearing a child contaminates a woman is quite wrong and not one the church today would countenance but, from what I hear about how popular the Churching of Women was in certain places, there must have been something that speaks to this profound human experience. I would imagine that a formal acknowledgement after a period of recovery and a public event to mark the closure on such a traumatic experience as child birth (at least it always looked pretty traumatic from where I was standing!) might well be something a woman would want to do – especially in an age where there were no anaesthetics.

All this goes to show how this most extraordinary child began by living a most ordinary life. As the writer to the Hebrews says “He had to be made like his brethren in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.” Jesus, like any of us was subject to the traditions of his people and his family.

It is Simeon and Anna who point to the other side of the coin of course. The beautiful words of the Nunc Dimittis appear as an upwelling of poetry in the old man’s soul. “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation.”

All Jews regarded themselves as the chosen people. Something we Scots and Americans have half suspected of ourselves in our more extravagant or mad moments! But the Jews obviously had cause to think of themselves as such. It was pretty clear however, that - occupied and subjugated people that they were - they never going to be a world power- not by human means at any rate. Some therefore, looked for a celestial champion that would come and lead them to victory over all their enemies and make them rulers of all the nations. They were carried away by the notion of their own extraordinariness. But there were also those like Simeon and Anna, known as the “quiet in the land” who had no such dreams of banners and armies, but rather waited in prayer and patience for the time that God would come to comfort his people. It is to people like these that the Christ is revealed. An ordinary baby and yet one that will be “a light to lighten the nations and to be the glory of his people” The ordinary and the extraordinary, the human and the divine. In Jesus, God has bound them inextricably together. This is God’s answer to the suffering of the world - his salvation. In the face of the appalling events around us in the Middle East, Australia, Puerto Ricco, this terrible virus in China, our own political divisions and the rest of the litany of human suffering it may seem hopelessly inadequate - this child this light of the world has come and yet darkness and suffering have hardly gone away - but this is Gods answer and it has to be this way - why?

First, because any answer has to reach beyond this life. Simeon says “Lord now lettest now thy servant depart in peace”. His understanding of this world is seen in the light of what comes next. This is not the last word - thank God. All the young that die in war and conflict, military and civilian, - all those whose lives are cut short unfinished and unfulfilled - there could be no genuine salvation for them if salvation were confined to this life -confined to what human beings, by their own power and action could ever achieve.

Secondly, power cannot be the answer. Even divine power. It always looks like the answer. If only we could make this or that happen - defeat this or that evil, but it isn’t. Even if God were to come down himself and force humanity, by the sheer exercise of his might, to desist from evil and selfish acts, it would not work. Its true there would be peace and Gods will would be carried out perfectly, but we would not be saved. Rather we would be destroyed, because without freedom to act as we see fit - for good or ill - we would not be truly alive - we would be robots - incapable of evil, but equally incapable of good.

“Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many.” The fall - because all are free to reject him, and Gods salvation and rising, because we also can choose to accept him and the light that he brings to transform our lives.

I cannot say that I have had much suffering in my life. Certainly not compared to the suffering I see day to day as a priest in the lives of those people I serve. (Most people do not see the hardship and trouble that people have. It is amazing how people that appear to have perfect lives and to be serenely happy have great sorrows that most people never see.) I have had little enough to bear, and yet I have, like all of you, had some. Times when the darkness has threatened to overwhelm me and I have begun to lose sight of who I am. And I can only say that it is there that I have known the light of Christ - sometimes in the actions of other people - sometimes in the quiet but direct and lifesaving sense of his presence - sometime just by the way things have worked out - ways that could be just coincidence, but which I know are not. Often it seems that Christ must wait until the last minute to save - as if God has watched too many westerns and times his interventions like those of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry- just as the enemy is about to overrun us. But he has never left me to the darkness and has saved me time and time again. Sometimes it is only afterwards that we see the help was there all along. But it is there - and it can be found in the eyes of little children - at least sometimes it can.

The ordinary and the extraordinary - Christ comes to us in both - just as we shall shortly remind ourselves once again - he comes to us in the ordinary things of bread and wine and yet through them touches us with his extraordinary and divine person.

Happy Candlemas - happy light of the world - happy lives that are saved - not from suffering - for we shall all bear our share of that - but saved from its defeat and saved for the transformation of our ordinary lives into lives that can grow and blossom in eternal light.