

Loving Father, help us this morning and in the whole year ahead to serve you patiently and prayerfully, as Simeon did, and thus understand better the true significance of the tiny baby in the Temple, destined to be the Man ready to Die. Amen.

The Man Ready to Die (Isaiah 42.1-9; Luke 2.25-35)

I like worshipping in this cosy room, especially as in the absence of a clock anyone wanting to time the sermon has to be a tad more circumspect. **Happy New Year to everyone** (including the would-be clock-watchers!)

Today is Epiphany Sunday, **twelfth night weekend**. I say “weekend” because some folk think decorations should be taken down on the **5th**, others on the **6th**. Who has taken all their decorations down already? Who is going to leave them up for a while? You’re obviously not/very **superstitious**. Or else you are following my favourite superstition that you can avoid bad luck by keeping them up until February 2nd. That’s how things were in Tudor Britain and still are in much of Europe today.

Today’s worship is a sort of conflation of Epiphany and an early **celebration** of a prominent festival in the church calendar – **CANDLEmas**. For Christians Jesus is the **“LIGHT of the world”** hence the candle-lit procession in many Catholic Churches on February 2nd. And many Orthodox Christians have beeswax candles blessed in church for future use at home.

I remember Mike saying how all families have their different **Christmas traditions**, but it is also the case that most European countries have different **Candlemas traditions**, the majority involving food. In Spain, for instance, whoever finds baby figures hidden inside the so-called Kings’ Cake on January 6th, has to provide food for the Candlemas get-together on February 2nd. Now that’s a neat link between Epiphany and our Candlemas reading.

In what we call the **Presentation of Christ in the Temple**, we think back to a very different place of worship from the Clarke Foley centre. The infant Jesus and his mother were there for the **ceremonial purification** for a Jewish woman 40 days after childbirth.

First of all I want to emphasise the importance of this Presentation of the holy child. Jesus was brought from his home and presented in God's Temple, as required by the Law of Moses (v.23). Last week Pat told us about the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, in the form of a **select group** who followed the star to worship the holy child. Now we celebrate the occasion of the coming of the 'Messiah' **in a very public place**.

But this is where we find the paradox. God did not reveal Himself in the way Jews in those days expected. He was imagined as a mighty warrior, advancing on Jerusalem with irresistible force. But in Luke's Gospel we are presented with a picture of **frailty**: the frailty of both the baby and the two elderly members of the congregation who recognized him.

This is **how God presents himself** most of the time. We often fail to recognize God's work in our midst because we are looking for the big scale - miraculous signs, glamour and noise; we miss God because he does not usually work through such spectacular means. We need to **listen to God** who speaks in a still soft voice, through ordinary circumstances and often in unconventional ways.

This is why I like the example of **Simeon - and Anna** (who was also known as a prophet). They were advanced in age, weak and **frail**; probably written off by the prominent members of society. But it is they who were **led by the Spirit of God** to welcome Jesus in the Temple. They were the ones who recognized this little infant and his true significance and praised God for him (vv. 38,28). There would have been a multitude of people in the Temple performing all sorts of religious rites and sacrifices. But **none of the others** saw God acting in Jesus.

Simeon is the main character in our reading so let's focus on Simeon's reception of Jesus in the Temple. This should help us appreciate why Simeon could see God in Jesus and why we may miss seeing God acting in our midst today.

First of all Simeon was '**righteous and devout**'. 'Righteousness' refers to a man or woman who has right relationships all round. Moreover, he was 'devout', an expression of his closer relationship with God, a deep sense of God's presence in his life and ceaseless prayer. He was a man soaked in the Holy Spirit, as Luke tells us three times (vv. 25,26,27). So his words conveyed great weight as he spoke in the Temple.

Secondly, he had **great expectations**. He was full of hope. He had known what he was looking forward to for quite some time – Jesus (literally, “*God saves*”). He never gave up but waited in hope and trust for God’s *salvation* in person (v.30). The first line of his blessing says: ‘*Now let thy servant depart in peace*’ (v.29) in the Nunc Dimittis version of Simeon’s song used at Evensong. In simple words it means ‘*Now I can die in peace*’. He felt his life was fulfilled and complete. In a political and social situation where people were losing hope and direction of life, Simeon was an exception. He now had ‘*peace*’. The word for peace is **Shalom** which actually means wholeness. It is in God that we find wholeness of life, not least at the start of a New Year of depressing uncertainty.

The **third** thing to notice is Simeon’s immense **knowledge of scripture and tradition**. Simeon’s song was full of Old Testament references. He would have been familiar with our Isaiah passage anticipating *a light for the Gentiles* (Is. 42.6). With his whole life dedicated to the living tradition of God’s people, Simeon was in a much better position to recognise what God was beginning to do in the life of Jesus. Likewise, scripture and tradition give us the insight to recognize what God is doing in the present time.

The **fourth** characteristic I like about Simeon is his **openness**. Simeon had grown up as a Jew and the Jews of his time shared an exclusivist world-view. For his generation the world was clearly divided into two camps: God’s people (Jews) and other folk (the Gentile nations of the world). **God only favoured his people**.

But **look at Simeon’s song**: he realized that God’s salvation would include the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Notice how he declared that Jesus would be *a light for revelation to the Gentiles* (v.32a), *and the glory of your people Israel* (vv.32b).

In a close-minded community, Simeon was championing openness. He understood God’s concern for all peoples and nations. Such openness helped him to understand the **comprehensive and inclusive mission of Jesus**, for *all nations* (v.31), not least the good folk of Ilkley.

My **fifth and final point** about Simeon is that openness involves **frankness**, like Yorkshire folk famed for saying things as they are. I expect Mike has got used to that by now!

Picture that scene in the Temple. For Mary there would have been no series of antenatal **check ups**. None of those regular assessments of the new baby that are recorded in the child's "red book" these days. Every hospital appointment or home check up occasions anxiety for parents and grandparents – is our baby ok? Or is he or she one of the 2% with a birth defect? Or worse still, one of the much smaller number of babies tragically born with a life-limiting condition? Some of you have experience of a frightening diagnosis from a doctor or other medical specialist. Devastating words like, *"I'm sorry, but you must be prepared for him or her to die at any time"*.

Mary and Joseph knew that their **baby was special**. Luke tells us that *they marvelled at what was said about him* (v.33) but even so, I doubt if they were prepared for the shocking prediction Simeon was about to give them.

Salvation does not come without cost – **the shadow of the cross** hung over even the infant Jesus. Simeon warned that Jesus would be opposed: *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against"* (v.34) telling Mary that *"a sword will pierce your own soul too"* (v.35). Simeon's role could be compared with the consultant having to reveal a life-limiting condition. In effect he was describing, as in our sermon title this morning, **"the man ready to die"**.

So a **righteous, devout, hugely expectant, scripture-loving, open-minded and frank Simeon** understood what was really happening in the Temple. These godly elderly people help us to understand the mission of Jesus, **"the man ready to die"**. Simeon had deeper insight that helped him to accept an ordinary and poor infant as God's salvation. And **we must do likewise**.

If Simeon had been waiting for spectacular signs, he would have failed to recognise the baby Jesus. Like Simeon and Anna, we need to recognise a God who **speaks in a still soft voice, through ordinary circumstances and often in unconventional ways**.

So help us Lord, to be **faithful, expectant, steeped in your Word, open and frank** as we strive to follow you.

May we be able to say, like Simeon in Timothy Dudley-Smith's wonderful version of the Nunc Dimittis:

*Faithful vigil ended,
Watching, waiting cease,
Master, grant your servant
A discharge in peace.*

Amen