

Community Eucharist Sermon  
Westcott House - Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2008  
Candlemas

Malachi 3.1-5, Luke 2.22-40

"Now at this birth season of decease,  
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,  
Grant Israel's consolation  
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow."

In his poem, "A Song for Simeon" Eliot evokes the many layers of paradox and contrast that make up Luke's account of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The divine Word, who has come to grant the salvation of Israel is still only a tiny child, 40 days old, who has not yet learnt to speak. The hope and joy the birth of a new child inspires in the parents is placed alongside the pain and death foretold by the prophet. The beginning of a new life, dedicated to the Lord, signals the end of a long life of waiting for the old man who may now depart in peace.

This bringing together of conflicting emotions, the collision of contrasting moments in people's lives, the bittersweet quality of much of our experience is intrinsic to human existence. We don't live in isolation. We are connected to those around us, their lives intertwined with ours.

As with all new parents, Mary and Joseph will have had dramatic experience of this connection in adjusting to the birth of a baby. The new child completely turns life upside down. They will have discovered the inevitable dependence of the infant Jesus upon them; their lives (and sleeping patterns!) are bound up with his. Daily practical needs must be attended to amidst wonder and love at this new creation. It is easy to forget, with the proliferation of nativity scenes of the holy family, how significant it is that Mary and Joseph are referred to as Jesus' parents, that Joseph explicitly takes on the role of father. Jesus, God Incarnate, enters the reality of the interconnectedness of human life.

The visit of this family to the temple is a manifestation of their common life. Two aspects of the Jewish Law lie behind this incident. The purification of the mother, which must be performed 40 days after the birth of a male child, and the redemption of the first born son which commemorates the Lord's redemption of his people from Egypt. Luke freely moves between the ritual of mother and child. The offering of two turtle doves is that laid down in Leviticus for the rite of purification, but Luke seems to associate it with designating the child as holy to the Lord. He even goes so far as to speak of "their purification." The whole family participate in this event- it is impossible to distinguish exactly who does what.

In the encounter with Simeon, the intertwining of lives is extended beyond the Holy Family. Just as Jesus is dependent on his earthly parents for his birth and nurture, so Simeon is dependent on Jesus for his release to a peaceful death. Eliot's Simeon declares,

"I am tired of my own life and the lives of those after me,  
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me."

The light and glory that the old man prophesies is not for him to see. Yet, with his own eyes he has seen the child who will be the salvation of the world. Eliot picks up on the disenchantment of one who has been waiting for a decisive event of salvation before he can depart this life. Yet Simeon perceives in the child Jesus the miracle of God's redemption of his people. Simeon's understanding of his own life and death are bound up with the coming of Christ. In his prophesy Simeon's life becomes part of the future of the child and his parents, while their presence releases him from the burden of "tomorrow." This prophecy confronts Mary and Joseph with a future of piercing anguish, yet they marvel at the salvation they hold in their arms.

The intertwining of our lives brings both joy and pain, long periods of waiting and moments where truth is perceived, the peace of companionship and the division of betrayal. In the Incarnation, God implicates himself in our human lives. In Christ, God comes close to us, reveals himself to us as our light and salvation. Christ's participation in human relationships reveals God's engagement with us, the truth of his love for us. But this also reveals the failings and inadequacies of our relationships.

For Malachi, God will draw near to us, but he draws near for judgement. For Simeon, Christ is a revelation to the Gentiles, but his light will also reveal the inner thoughts of many. We wait for the Lord, for his return to his temple, but who can endure the day of his coming?

As we mark the close of the season of Epiphany when we celebrate God's self-revelation among us we move towards the self-examination of Lent. The glory of Christ revealed to Simeon is a piercing light and a refining fire. We must be prepared for the light of his Epiphany to challenge us to face our inner thoughts, and to be thankful for those whose lives are intertwined with ours.

Yet in bringing to light the things hidden in darkness, and by purifying the silver of our hearts, Christ seeks to bring us closer to him. In the intertwining of the divine life with ours, in the deep involvement in human relationships, Christ redeems those relationships. In turning from Epiphany towards Lent, we hold within our hearts the glorious revelation of Christ and allow this light to illuminate our secret thoughts, to shine into the day to day interactions with those around us.

As we gather around the altar, our lives intertwined in prayer, meals, friendship, and study, as we gather as a community, Christ is in the midst of us in his body and blood. His life is intertwined with each of ours, binding us to him and to each other.

Through his body we celebrate our participation in our common life and in the divine life. As God enters the complexity of human relationships, the light of his salvation shines in our hearts. May we join with Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna and all the saints and angels as the intertwining of our lives gives praise and glory to the God who has revealed himself to us in Christ.

Amen.

Jenny Yates