

Christmas 1 Luke 2:22-40

This reading from the gospel we just heard is more commonly associated with the presentation of Christ in the Temple also known as Candlemas, which we keep as a church festival on February 2nd. It's a red letter saints day, that is a day of obligation yet such festivals tend to fail to really attract the crowds. It's just as well then that the lectionary writers have incorporated this snippet of Jesus' childhood into the normal round of weekly readings because it is very important that we hear this. The events which took place as Jesus was presented at the temple were truly extraordinary, so much so that the words uttered by Simeon have made it into our liturgy.

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 peoples, to be a light to the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel. Sound familiar? It is part of the prayer book from its very inception and for those of us brought up Anglican it is part of our liturgical DNA, evensong without the Nunc is barely evensong at all!

And of course we don't pick bits of scripture for use in liturgy that have no meaning, just because they have a nice turn of phrase. The events at the temple that day of both prophecy and fulfilment of prophecy were, for Mary and Joseph at least, further proof that theirs was no ordinary boy. If an angelic annunciation, virgin conception, random visits from shepherds and foreigners weren't enough, now at the presentation of the child to God an old man recognises his own prophecy has been fulfilled.

Who knows how long Simeon had waited to see the messiah, who knows what expectations he had. When he understood God to have send him a prophecy that he would not die before he saw the messiah, did he really expect to recognise a baby as God's chosen or would he have been more likely to have been watching out for a great preacher or warrior to begin gathering people together to take on the forces which oppressed them? Was he spending his dotage in the temple in the hope that God's chosen one would be starting his work there, looking to acquire strength from the religious authorities and recruits from amongst the most zealous believers? It is reasonable to suspect he was, far more difficult to imagine that Simeon was inspecting all the babies as they came to be presented to God. And yet the arrival of this baby caused him to be disturbed by the spirit. Another random person, seemingly unknown to the family, intervenes in their daily life and sees something in the boy Jesus that is hidden from most.

But not only is this a fulfilment of prophecy, the story goes on to produce for Jesus' family a new prophecy which clearly had enough impact for it to be later recalled and recorded in the gospel. Simeon calls Jesus God's salvation, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, he sees that future in the boy Jesus. But God's salvation was what the messiah was to bring so that is bound up in Simeon's first prophecy. Then he calls Jesus a light for the Gentiles and the Glory of Israel and it seems to me that here he says something new.

The prophets of old had looked forward to the messiah coming to save Israel and to glorify it in the world and they talk of the whole world coming to see God's strength through Israel and its achievements but these prophecies seem to speak of an Israel triumphant over the rest of the world. These are prophecies of a conquering messiah where the gentiles have no choice but to recognise the strength of the God of Israel.

Yet Simeon's new prophecy strikes as foreseeing a messiah equally valuable to and interested in Gentiles and Jews. He is not to be the conqueror of the gentile but rather the light which is their revelation. There is a particular poetry to the old words we used in the liturgy, a light to lighten the gentiles. Not a light to blind them into being unable to deny the messiah but a light which attracts them, which illuminates their path. And also the glory of Israel, still God's chosen people are at the centre of things but God's love here is directed to all humanity

where the faithful are rewarded and those to whom God is revealed for the first time are welcomed.

This is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism, we are not born Christians, even when we are born into families of church members, we have to come to God ourselves. We cannot call ourselves Christian just because our mother or grandmother is a Christian just as a Jewish person knows that they are Jewish based on their genealogy. Each generation has to come to Christ itself and each individual must recognise the light of Christ and allow themselves to be lightened by it. And this is what the prophets hadn't really expected, this was the truly unique message Jesus brought making him both the fulfilment of prophecy and the beginning of something entirely new.

As we remember Christ presented before God, let us remember our own baptism and confirmation, or that moment when we first recognised God in our midst. May that memory of God's choosing us to be God's own sustain and inspire us as Simeon's words inspired Jesus' own parents to keep focussed on God and keep expecting the extraordinary from their son.