

**Presentation of Christ in the Temple**  
**Malachi 3 1-5; Hebrews 2 14 – end; Luke 2 22-40**

**“A Little Child Shall Lead Them”**

Today we celebrate Candlemas. What is that you might well ask. Candlemas is also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Under OT law a woman was to be presented for purification by sacrifice 33 days after a boy's circumcision.

Candlemas actually falls on next Friday, February 2, which is traditionally the 40th day of the Christmas–Epiphany season but we chose this Sunday on which to celebrate it. Candlemas is also the pivotal point between Christmas and Easter and can be summed up in some verses I found recently:

*When the song of the angels is silent,*

*When the star in the sky is gone,*

*When the kings and the princes are home,*

*When the shepherds are back with their flocks,*

*The work of Christmas begins.*

And what is that work?

*To find the lost,*

*To heal the broken,*

*To feed the hungry,*

*To release the prisoner,*

*To rebuild the nations,*

*To bring peace among brothers,*

*To make music in the heart.*

Our Gospel reading this morning is a bit out of sequence. Following Christmas and the story of the birth of Christ, we had Epiphany which celebrates the story of the three Kings. This was followed by the accounts of Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael and then, last week, an account of the first miracle that Jesus performed at the wedding in Cana.

Now we go back to Jesus as a baby. What an unusual story it is for us today with its account of ancient laws, sacrifices and prophecies – all a bit alien to us today in the twenty-first century. But, of course, there are deep truths here and a message that is just as relevant to us today as it was two thousand years ago. Let's look at the context of this story in Luke's gospel.

You might ask, "Where have I heard that before?" It is very similar to the Old Testament story of how Samuel was also taken by his parents to the Temple in the manner required by the law. We also read in that account of the response of two witnesses to that event. There is Hannah who sings a song of thanksgiving and Eli who blesses Samuel's parents. How remarkably like the account of Simeon and Anna in the Jesus story? In the Samuel story we read "Now the boy ... continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men."

In the Jesus story Luke writes “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.”

The future ministry of Samuel was to bring to Israel relief from the human oppression of a physical enemy - the Philistines. This foreshadowed the future ministry of the infant Jesus to bring relief for all mankind from a spiritual enemy that can be summed up in the word “sin”.

Let’s look at the story and see what it can say to us today. Who are the characters? First there are Mary and Joseph. Then there are Simeon and Anna. Finally, there is the baby Jesus.

Let’s start with Mary and Joseph. Here we have a young couple with a young child. They are tired and exhausted. Mary is still recovering from the birth. They have no permanent home at this time and will soon become refugees. They appear to be the key characters in the narrative but the story is not primarily about them. It is about the child who they have brought to the Temple to be blessed and named by the priest in accordance with the requirement of the law. But this is no ordinary child. This child would grow to be the most influential man in history. In Mary and Joseph’s faithfulness and obedience to God’s word there is, of course, a challenge to us.

The next characters in this story are two elderly people who confront Mary and Joseph with remarkable messages in which they are urged to look

beyond themselves and see that their child is to be “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.” Who are these two characters?

Simeon and Anna were waiting patiently for God’s promised one. Luke says that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what the couple said about their baby. (This may seem a little strange given that they had already experienced angelic visitations and mysterious visitors from the east!) When we look at Simeon and Anna we see real trust and faithfulness demonstrated in their waiting on God. They had both waited a long time. Perhaps from this we might learn that God doesn’t always answer our prayers and grant our desires immediately. The preacher John Wimber once said “I’m just loose change in God’s pocket. He can spend me as he chooses.” This is a remarkably submissive thing to say to God. But it can also bring a wonderful liberation and security knowing that we are in God’s hands.

We will often need patience and perseverance as we wait for God to come to us. We also need to put ourselves in the right place as did Simeon and Anna by their being in the Temple – in the presence of God. At last they were given their hearts’ desires – to see the baby who was God made man. And perhaps there is also a message there for us. If we are open to God – in the right place – not necessarily physically but mentally and spiritually - he will make himself

known to us. We too can have an encounter where the Jesus we have read about, and perhaps followed from afar, suddenly becomes life shatteringly real to us.

Finally, we come to the helpless baby, unable to speak at this time, yet bringing peace and purpose to all. It is he who is at the centre of this story. This is the child whose birth can change your life forever.

But let's return to Simeon and Anna. They were prophets. We normally associate the prophets with the OT but here we have two prophets in the NT.

Let's think about prophecy and what it is and what is its relevance for us today. Does God speak to us today and how?

I hope that you will bear with me if I share a personal story which might help. It's a story which you must judge for what it is - and please forgive me is a drop a few names along the way! I just hope that it might be helpful to you and that glory may to God.

Many years ago, when I was in my teens, I attended a Bible Study led by an older man who was well versed in the scriptures. He was taking us through the Acts of the Apostles and had come to the account of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. You will recall that Saul was blinded and that God spoke to man called Ananias and told him to go and pray for Saul that his sight might be restored. God's words to Ananias were "This man is my chosen

instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their Kings and to the people of Israel". After reading those words, the Bible Study leader paused for a moment and then turned to me and said "David, that is for you. You too will appear before Kings and Rulers." I was completely taken aback at this. I come from a very ordinary working-class background. There was no way in which this might happen.

Run forward some years and after starting a career in the legal profession, as you may know, I one day found myself leading a team from Cobham going out to work in a Romanian orphanage. As that work progressed, I was made redundant from my job and wondered what to do. To cut a very long, but quite remarkable story of co-incidences (or perhaps – God incidences!) I was offered the role of Director of a charity working with projects for young people in Romania which was led by HRH The Princess Margarita of Romania, eldest daughter of King Michael of Romania who, although crowned as king of that country, was forced to abdicate by the communists just after the end of WWII.

As I accepted the position, I recalled the words spoken to me at that Bible study. I soon found myself appearing before Kings (and Queens!) and Princes and Princesses. To be honest, it all became a bit of joke when Carrie would say to me on my return from a trip – "Well who have you met this time?!!"

I have shared that story because to me that was a prophetic word that was given to me in my teenage years. It was to me the Word of God and as such it later kept me focused on the work to which I believe God had called me at that time and, I hope, my feet firmly on the ground during the many meetings I had with Kings and Princes, Archbishops and celebrities.

Prophecy requires a bit of explanation. It can be a dangerous area and is open to misuse. We might associate it with a glimpse of the future – and so it was for me. However, and perhaps more importantly, it is the word of God for us now. That word might be one of direction or it could one of encouragement. Sometimes we need others to encourage us in what might be a particular calling or a vocation that they see in us. No matter in what tense it is given, if it is God's word to us then we need to listen.

How do we express the prophetic word? Robert was never comfortable with private prophecy when praying for individuals at events such as weddings and I agree with him that we need to be very careful. However, I do believe that God can, and will, speak to us today in a variety of ways. And, don't forget, in the OT we read of how God spoke through an Ass! Sometimes people do things which are in themselves prophetic in that they express something of the heart and mind of God.

Personally, I am always hesitant about expressing anything in terms of “God told me”. I am more comfortable with, “I feel, or I believe, that God might be speaking to me.” It that way whatever has been said can be weighed by those whose wisdom we trust. And perhaps what God might be saying to you, might be for someone else – like the man who led the Bible Study I attended.

We need to pray for another, encourage one another, and if we feel that God might be wanting us to say something to another person, then we need to be bold enough to say so.

What do we expect when we listen to a sermon? I was particularly encouraged by the message brought to us last week by Archdeacon Paul about water into wine and the best being left to last.

We should be open to hearing God speak to us not just from the pulpit but also through our friends, especially those within the church family who might be praying for us.

Here at St Andrew’s we, like many other churches, are faced with an aging congregation. However, for us, especially in the past couple of years, our children and youth work has been given remarkable new injection of life, growth and vision through the leadership of Esther of her team. I would like to close by returning to the title of my sermon – “A little child shall lead them.”

It is great to hear from the children at the end of the 10 o'clock service about what they have been doing. Of, course, it is often amusing. Never work with children and animals is the old adage. It sometimes provides us a sort of "Oh isn't it lovely moment." However, if we are not careful it simply becomes entertainment. Remember "A little child shall lead them." Are we listening for what God might be saying to us through our children and young people? After all they are part of the family and it is they who will be the church of tomorrow.

As we continue to pray for our next Rector let us also pray that he or she might be a person who is prophetic – not necessarily someone who will thunder forth from the pulpit – although that might happen! Let us pray that he or she might be a person who listens to God and who is able to bring God's living word to us.

Let us also pray for the young people and let us encourage them as they start their journey with God. When Jesus was asked "Do you hear what these children are saying?" He replied, "Yes - have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?" In the Book of Acts we read, "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

Let us encourage our young people and, perhaps, in an appropriate setting, we might even feel that we have a word from God for them as did that Bible Study leader for me many years ago, and as did Simeon and Anna over the baby Jesus in the Temple.

And, you know, perhaps they in turn might bring God's word us today.

Let's wait and see!

Amen.