

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

A child will change your life forever!

What I want to say this morning could be summed up in these few words. “The birth of a child will change your life forever.” It doesn’t matter whether you are a parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, sibling or just a family friend. The new arrival will impact your life in some way whoever you are. Those of us who are parents know that even after that squalling but adorable baby who gives us sleepless nights has grown through childhood and become an adult they are still with us. Sometimes as parents we might look forward to the day when that child leaves home to begin a life of its own. Just get me through the ‘terrible teens’ might be our prayer! But even after they have fled the nest they are still there providing us with joy, anticipation and, sometimes, tears and grief. We can’t turn the clock back - the child, like “the Force”, is with you always! However the child I want to speak about is not just any child.

Our reading from the New Testament this morning is a bit out of sequence. Following Christmas and the story of the birth of Christ, we had Epiphany which traditionally celebrates the story of the three Kings. This was followed by the baptism of Jesus by John and, last week, the account of Jesus teaching in the Temple.

Now we go back to look at the account of Jesus being presented as a child in the Temple in accordance with the custom of law. What an unusual story it is 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.

What might first strike us is, "Where have I heard that before?" In the Old Testament we read 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 story of Samuel 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 to bring to Israel relief from the human oppression of a physical enemy - the Philistines - 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".

So what's going on here? Is this just a remarkable coincidence or is Luke using a story from the Old Testament to support his take on Jesus and his ministry? I don't think that we should be too concerned. Luke was not an historian whose main purpose was factual completeness and accuracy. Instead he shaped his account to help convey his message. Some stories like this may be more theological than biographical. But they are no less valuable or less true. On the contrary, they convey something deeply true about Jesus, because they are a reflection on the meaning of the whole of his life, not simply of one episode. Luke deeply believed that God's purpose is seen in the way he has acted, and will continue to act, in history. In other words, the important thing is that Luke wanted to get across the message of who Jesus was and why he had come. For those who read or listened to Luke's words, it was the message that mattered.

Luke was writing for the early Christians and addresses his his gospel to 'Theophilus' which means 'Lover of God'. This could have been a specific individual or simply any Christian such as you and me.

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 infant Jesus.

Let's start with Mary and Joseph. Here we have a young couple with an eight day old 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. Of course in Mary and Joseph's faithfulness and obedience to God's word there is a challenge to us and I want to return to this in a moment.

The next players 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 his 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 in their being in the Temple. 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 this helpless baby, unable to speak at this time, yet bringing peace and purpose to all. It is he is at the centre of this story. This is the child whose birth can truly change your life forever.

Parents usually have a choice when it comes to naming their child. They might use a family name or perhaps one of the more popular names of the day such as that of a footballer, a film icon, or even royalty. However there was no

choice for Mary and Joseph. Earlier in his narrative Luke tells how it was during an angelic visitation that Mary was told to name her baby Jesus.

Names are given to identify who we are. Jesus means the one who will save his people from their sins or, in short the Saviour. The idea of salvation is sometimes considered an old fashioned precept but every day we are confronted with contemporary examples of our need to have someone to save us. Many of the latest blockbuster films are centred on a “saviour”. Deep down we each know we need saving – often from our very selves.

I said earlier that I wanted to return to Mary and Joseph and their role in this story. They could not have received this message from Simeon and Anna if they had stayed in the Bethlehem stable. It was their obedience and trust in God that took them to the Temple – the place in which God spoke to them.

Earlier this morning Robert moved the nativity scene with the stable into a corner ready to be put away for another year. Today is Candlemas which is a turning point in the church’s calendar when we turn away from the season of Epiphany and begin to look towards the events of Easter.

We tend to offer a rather sanitised and cosy version of the stable in our churches today instead of the dirty, unhygienic place that it really was. Despite that the stable might still appear to offer a more secure place than the world outside and beyond. We are sometimes in danger of remaining in our cosy

“stables”, our comfortable corners, that place where God first came to us. Last week Foli spoke to us about how we should consider offering our gifts and talents to God and how he might use them.

God calls each one of us to move on from our stable. That place where Christ was born for us, and learn to take risks and make choices as we grow in our understanding and experiences of him.

Soon it will be Easter and we will remember again the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. But even that is not the end. Beyond is Pentecost when God comes to each of us in the person of the Holy Spirit so that we like Simeon and Anna, might know within our own hearts that we have had an encounter with the Son of God. And I'd like to focus on this experience of “knowing” as I draw to a close.

We all of us experience from time to time what are called ‘light bulb’ moments [or perhaps today ‘candle moments!'] when something we may have puzzled over suddenly makes sense and becomes a reality for us. When still a youngster I went to a Methodist youth gathering in a large country house one weekend. I had been brought up in the church and had even started to teach in Sunday School. However, I can still vividly recall one evening when, gathered around a piano, a group stood started to sing Wesley's great hymn “And can it be/That I should gain/An interest in the Saviour's blood?” Suddenly I had a

“light bulb” moment as it dawned on me that it was possible to experience God as a person rather than simply as someone I knew of from reading the Bible. I have to say that it was several years later, at a Billy Graham Crusade meeting at Earls Court, that, continuing to use Wesley’s words, it seemed that “My chains fell off/My heart was free”. That of course was just a beginning. But I then knew that a baby born two thousand years ago was somehow going to change the course of my life forever.

Just last week I read these words.

“Ruthless trust is an unerring sense, way deep down, that beneath the surface agitation, boredom, and insecurity of life, it’s gonna be alright. Ill winds may blow, more character defects may surface, sickness may visit, and friends will surely die; but a stubborn, irrefutable certainty persists that God is with us and loves us in our struggle to be faithful.”ⁱ

May each one of us reach out with such ruthless trust to willingly embrace this child born in a stable, this earthly son of Mary, this Saviour proclaimed by Simeon and Anna. Let each one of us receive him into hearts by faith that we might know him and the power of his resurrection. Let us allow him to be the one child above all others who will truly change our lives for ever.

Amen.

ⁱ Brennan Manning: “Ruthless Trust. The Ragamuffin’s Path To God.”