

Sermon on The Presentation of the Lord (Candlemass)  
(Luke 2:22-40)

So every 6-8 yrs, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord falls on a Sunday and because, in the largest churches in the world, it is marked as a Holy Day, its celebration and the readings associated with it take precedence of the normal Sunday events and reading cycle.

And right off the bat you may be wondering why the Great Tradition would have marked it this way, for the story from our gospel reading does not appear to teach us much about God, that is theology, or help us very much with how we might live creatively and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In many ways this story clashes with our assumptions around the type of story we expect the NT to tell.

Put most broadly, we expect the New Testament to make and back up its main claim: that in the man Jesus of Nazareth, God has drawn especially close, that in his appearing God was not only working but in Person.

We get that the NT can't make this claim in any straightforward way because it's precisely Jewish monotheism that has made sure to tell us that God and humans can never be confused. God is Creator, humans are created; God is infinite, humans are finite; God can't be "in Person."

So, now to say that the one God has become human is a radical but also very dangerous claim and must be mostly made, indirectly, that is through stories.

The stories of the NT make this radical and dangerous claim by painting for us an adult Jesus who contrasts strikingly with the character of God as typically understood, whether in ancient Israel or by women and men on the street today.

Notice, I didn't say, "actually," but "as typically understood." It turns out that Jews do not find in their scriptures the kind of God many Christians find there or that many non-Christians imagine is portrayed there.

To get back to our Gospel reading, here we find a different kind of strangeness that confronts us; although adults are all different, babies are, in many ways, all alike.

The adult Jesus has a highly developed, distinctive, and searing personality that holds in tension the radical inclusiveness discerning readers cherish but alongside the most uncomfortable commitment to truth-telling we have recorded in the ancient world.

Writing to within the Roman Empire, it's as if Luke understands that given such a combination, pagan readers might be tempted to think that Jesus was an Olympian god dropped from the sky as a fully formed adult

But baby Jesus presumably cried (forget the “no crying he makes!”), cooed and babbled incoherently, suckled and had the messy discharges common to every infant.

the infant Jesus releases emotions that are not very complicated; as simple and as unprovocative as the infant himself: we want to cuddle and protect him.

Part of Luke’s genius is that he harnesses this emotion to humanize the one who the angel, in his announcement to the shepherd, called “Christ the Lord.”

“the Lord,” by the way, is the Hebrew designation for God. As “Christ the Lord” reduced to the condition of helpless newborn, God’s closeness is revealed as vulnerability.

The great Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, not a practicing Christian, put it this way in his poem “A Prayer for My Son:” “Though you can fashion everything from nothing every day, and teach the morning stars to sing, you have lacked articulate speech to tell your simplest want, and known, wailing upon a woman’s knees, all of that worst ignominy of flesh and bone.”

We already feel a tremor of what is coming for him: Jesus’ involuntary defenselessness and infantile ignorance at the beginning mirror his voluntary defenselessness with full knowledge at the end.

But there is more; the infinite will draw close to the finite: but to do so must mean adhering to a culture in this case Jewish culture: He is circumcised; Mary comes to the Temple for her purification rites required of all women after childbirth and then Jesus is brought to the temple to fulfill the law that says that all firstborn sons be dedicated to God’s service.

But the Law of Moses allowed parents to redeem their child from a life of serving in the temple by offering something in his stead, in the case of poor people, two turtledoves or young pigeons.

Thus is the Redeemer starts his life by being redeemed. Redeemed from “service to God,” he will be freed to Serve God.

This “being part of a culture” with all its strangeness, uniqueness, its strengths, but also its weaknesses also reveals God’s willing vulnerability.

Israel too felt herself isolated, trapped in a imperial and pagan empire that mocked her monotheistic vision. She always felt like her only option was to fight like hell for the scraps that fell from the table.

But Simeon takes the fighting words of Israel, bits and pieces of militaristic prophecy against the nations and rearranges them to say the opposite: the Messiah is here and he’s going to be a blessing not just for Israel but for the world.

Your isolation Israel is now going to work for your glory and for the world. But not without cost!

Imagine giving your baby to a stranger who takes him into his arms and then says to you “and a sword will pierce your own soul too!”

When Gabriel had first visited Mary, he’d said nothing about a sword!

This story then, is the equivalent of Yeats’s poem; Jesus, ignorant in his infancy is handed over to prophetic knowledge, incomplete as it is, of third parties, parties who will be saved by the one they cradle.

This is how this story becomes relevant for us. At this feast, we are like Simeon. As we love each other and speak the grace of the Gospel in our and to our vulnerability and need we find that God comes close; we find in our particular circumstances that we are cradling the light of salvation in the crook of our community.

As we engage with the reality that is our particular culture, time and place; as we engage the laws and customs of our time, the laws and customs of the Anglican church, say, we remind ourselves that in this feast we celebrate the fact that God’s truth and light and insight can penetrate any culture and society and draw us out of isolation to our truer purpose.

Sometimes, like Israel within the wider world, we can feel isolated and bound in our lives, but in the Spirit we are not. As we submit to the Spirit, we find that our “fighting words,” our “defensiveness” that isolate us *from* the world, become more and more words and actions *for* the sake of the world

I find this feast beautiful truly beautiful because in a few minutes we will hold a wafer in our hands; we hold the real presence of Christ and as we do, by faith, we discover that it is our real presence in the crook of Christ’s arms.

It may be a short time coming, or a long time, like it was for Anna, but the promise to each of us is that we will feel his strength, be filled with his wisdom and know God’s favour at the core of all our paradoxes.