

**THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE - Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020 7.30am**  
**Sung Eucharist 9.30am Holy Eucharist Readings:** Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2:14-18;  
Luke 2:22-40

Luke's is the only Gospel that records the presentation of Christ in the temple. Luke is showing that the Messiah is grounded in the tradition of Israel. This baby represents the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Old Simeon expresses this in his song: "My eyes have seen your salvation." It's confirmed by Anna who sees in this child hope for the "redemption of Jerusalem."

Yet this child also represents a challenge to those same hopes. Simeon foretells that he will be responsible for the "falling and rising of many." I wonder if we recognise the strangeness of this whole scenario. Having celebrated Christmas and the arrival of God into this world as a baby in a manger it ought not surprise us that this God doesn't come in the expected ways. Two old people, Simeon and Anna, and a 40-day old baby from a poor family. This is how God comes into the world.

Down through the years occasionally I've been asked, "How many people attend your church?" and "Do you have many young people?" Depending on the answer to these questions, the church where I minister is then judged whether or not it's a 'successful' church *or* even whether or not my ministry is a success.

A family in a former parish of mine told me their son-in-law, a gifted musician at a church that drew large numbers of people, including lots of young people, was told one day that because he'd reached the age of forty they'd prefer he no longer play because they wanted to present a younger profile of people up front. Interestingly that didn't seem to apply to the pastor.

Now it's pretty obvious that reaching out to young people and families and teenagers is one of our weaknesses as Anglicans. But one could also point out that our culture at large tends to exalt youth and sometimes to devalue the elderly.

At the same time, we have care centres for the very young and for the very old. There they're looked after by professional caregivers who mostly do a very good job. But there can exist a sense of the young and the old being out of the way so that everyone else can get on with their daily activities. After all, in a society where your value is measured by your productivity and how much you contribute to the economy, children and older people are a burden.

Jesus is presented in the Temple as an infant and is recognised as the salvation of Israel by two older adults. They didn't produce anything, they were dependents. The very ones we often push to the margins of our society are the ones who manifest the arrival of God's reign in Christ. What does that tell us about the nature of this reign?

Could it be that middle-class and middle-aged people are quite content with the status quo, the way things are, because life has worked out largely in their favour? There's little motivation for change or disruption. Life is good. It's the young and the old who long for things to be

different, who are discontented with the status quo, and who long for deliverance from the present. The young sometimes feel cut off from decision-making and influencing outcomes, looked down upon for their inexperience. The old sometimes feel ignored, that they've been "put on the shelf" as we say, because they no longer produce anything of value, or so it's perceived.

Yet today we see an old man holding a tiny baby and seeing the salvation of God. Is the Church today somehow missing out on something because we devalue or ignore or even deny the witness of the very young and the very old in showing God to the world? Do the younger turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the testimony of older adults who can teach them some important lessons about life and its triumphs and tragedies?

Do the older fail to discern the voice of the young and their insights into the ways God is manifest? Two old people who spend their days in the temple. A tiny baby too young to make decisions brought to the temple by his parents. Perhaps we'd do well to pay attention to those the world disregards or looks down on or shuffles off to the sidelines.

Fr Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk and director of the World Community for Christian Meditation. I heard him speak - a recording - some years ago on retreat and was very impressed. He writes a regular column in the English Catholic magazine *The Tablet*. A few years ago he recounted meeting a group of young people in Latin America. He arrived in the chapel where they were quietly sitting in their pews waiting to meet him. Laurence Freeman noticed there were cushions scattered on the floor and asked where they'd like to sit. "As if electronically ejected from their benches, they were on the cushions in a flash. I asked them how long they would like to meditate for and they said they normally did 20 minutes. They were between 12 and 14 years old" (*The Tablet*, 6 December 2014, p. 9).

He asked them why they thought it was good to pray in stillness and silence having been raised in a culture that demanded speed and constant communication. They replied that their lives felt just too busy. They were expected to achieve too much too quickly and to pack too many activities into their day. One girl said they were being asked unfairly to grow up too quickly. "... I wondered where the clarity of their detached view of themselves came from." It turned out they had a devoted teacher who trained them in the contemplative dimension of life and through their practice of meditation they became aware of the imbalance in the culture that was forming them.

Their teacher was now getting them to teach meditation to the younger children of the school. Freeman writes,

They were exemplars of a new kind of innocence . . . The old had sadly failed them, but together the two generations were experimenting with something both new and old. Today we are waiting together, young and old; or perhaps we are walking a bridge from past to future which is the timeless bridge of the presence whose span is contemplation, or, as Aquinas calls it, the 'simple enjoyment of truth.' The young, the very young too, are finely tuned to this presence."

When I lived in Newcastle it fascinated me whenever I went to St Mark's Islington and sat in the church full of tables and chairs, being served a meal then engaging in group discussion about Mary McKillop, and St Augustine, and Desmond Tutu, and Hildegard of Bingen and on and on. We'd finish with Compline before an altar ablaze in candlelight and sing the *Salve Regina* to plainchant. This had been initiated by the young people in a church that had been denuded of its furnishings and replaced with bean bags and a digital TV where the altar once stood. These young people were putting it all back!

Simeon and Anna had little to do except hang around the temple. Have we lost the value of contemplation and prayer and simple enjoyment of the truth and exchanged it for activism and over-planning and looking for quick fixes?

Simeon and Anna aren't mentioned again by Luke. It's likely that they'd died by the time Jesus reached adulthood and began his ministry. I find a model in that: witness to the presence of God among us, proclaim the gospel of hope because God is in charge of the world and its future. God will still be active once we leave the scene.

We can mentor the young and we can learn from the young. We can learn from the old and we can prepare for being old by learning from Simeon and Anna and their discernment which arose from spending time in the presence of God, then saying "Now Lord you let your servant go in peace because my eyes have seen your salvation."

Fr Mark Watson

