



YOUNG AND OLD NEEDING EACHOTHER - MUTUAL BLESSING

It is good that we have just had a child centred service prior to this Parish Worship for this synergy picks up nicely on Candlemas and Christ's Presentation in the Temple. In our Gospel reading which tells this story the two main characters are the infant Christ and the elderly priest Simeon along with the other adult observers. Both the infant and the old man need each other so that the story of Christ being presented and blessed can be told. So too the story of the living congregation of the Canongate needs both the young and the old to be complete.

The blessing that Christ receives from Simeon in the Temple becomes a mutual one as Simeon in turn feels blessed by the Christ child; so beautifully evoked in the 'nunc dimittis'. They need each other so that they might bring the hope of peace and light into their dark world. And we too as the collective third main character in this story are challenged to play our part to and to take this blessing out into the whole world.; something that the children did on our behalf in the earlier service.

In this story, often known as the Purification and the Presentation in the Temple, light plays a key part along with the blessing. The focus on light – 'to be a light to lighten the Gentiles' in turn is celebrated through Candlemas when traditionally at this time of year all the candles that were going to be used in worship during the year to represent Christ 'as the light of the world' were blessed.

Simeon too would share in this light as having blessed Christ he himself became enlightened and found the peace of mind that he had so patiently been waiting and striving for during his long life. Because of the Christ Child Simeon would have his epiphany moment when all suddenly became clear and his life of diligently serving his God made sense. It made sense because of the presence of a child. Simeon had patiently striven to serve and was rewarded with peace.

Often as we worship as adults we too like Simeon sometimes only see clearly when we see things through the innocent eyes of a child. Too often in the Church we can find ourselves being weighed down by so much historical, practical and procedural excess baggage that we miss the point and our epiphany moment never happens and in turn we never find that inner peace and contentment in Christ that is at the heart of our worship. We miss the point.

.....And the point is? Well perhaps its beautifully demonstrated in the children's display in front of us. A display that aims to bring light and peace to the world by blessing the five continents with the Holy Spirit.

Last week our service focused on the Beatitudes the original blessings of Christ as first delivered as the Sermon on the Mount. Neil explored these blessings with us from the pulpit. I often think of the journey into the pulpit as climbing onto the mountain side to deliver the message. But what goes up must come down and that is the challenge how do we take the message down from the mountain to share in the world. Moses too experienced this dilemma as he brought the tablets of stone down from Mount Sinai.

Probably the first blessing [links to Numbers found below St Andrews Jerusalem] we received in a sacred space was at our baptism. On the front of the Order of Service we see a picture that the children have been working on. We see Christ being blessed at his baptism [not to be confused with this presentation in the temple when he was 6 months old] by the Holy Spirit coming down from on high in the form of a dove – a symbol of peace. [emphasis the coming down the movement]

In your Order of Service you will find your own dove with a space for you to write the name of a person or a place that you would like to bless. Shortly your doves and your blessings and your chosen names will be presented to God's care and keeping. Just as Christ was in the Temple and just as the children did earlier.

But Christ was not blessed by Simeon so that he might remain and serve His people from within the walls of the Temple. He saw the whole world as a sacred space and after his baptism thirty years later he would take this blessing as an itinerant preacher and healer to those he found in the dark places of both mind, body and spirit. His healing ministry would bring light and peace to those in need through his presence and challenge those in authority to jettison their excess baggage of wealth and hypocrisy and dogmatic intransigence to join him on his journey.

Where should we go to be challenged just as Christ was?

Later this month after a period of over thirty years I will be returning to the Holy Land on a study trip with fellow candidates in training for the ministry from New College.

I know much will have changed since I was there as a student who at the time worshipped at St Columba's Pont St. Israel has always been on edge ever since its formation and blessings and peace between the Palestinians and the Jews are more often than not in very short measure. As I prepare to return I am anticipating how hard we will have to work to see hope beyond the troubles. There was no security wall when I was last there (compare with patrolling the Berlin Wall) and today it mars much of the Holy Land. However the same glorious sunrise will surely take place over the Sea of Galilee and the same starry nights which Jacob slept under and David watched over his sheep will still lighten up the Jordan Valley.

We have a visit to Yad Vashem on our study itinerary.. It would be wrong to say I am looking forward to returning it's a difficult place to take in and it is designed to make you feel uncomfortable and to challenge you - it has earned the right to do so as it attempts to commemorate the 6 million Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Last time I was there I was struck by a statue of an elongated mother who was weeping tears of stone for the lost 1.5 million children who were murdered. ' If the Lord's disciples are silent the stones will shout aloud ' the world was silent and the tears stones do indeed shout aloud pleading as if to say why were you not there to help. There is no peace nor blessing around this statue.

However there is a new tree on the Avenue of the Righteous. These trees are in honour of the non-Jews who tried to help protect those caught up in the Holocaust. There is a tree for the likes Oscar Schindler. But the one I will go and pay my respects to and be full of admiration for is that dedicated to Jane Haining. At our Holocaust Memorial Day Service in Loretto Chapel I told her inspiring story:

Born in Glasgow Jane felt called to work for the Church of Scotland and in the 1930's ended up working as a matron in Budapest at an orphanage next to the Scots Kirk . It was a girls' school and she became a mother figure to the girls who were both Christian and Jews there was nothing she would not do for them as she brought light into their world and was a blessing amongst them.

When war broke out in 1939 Jane happened to be back in Scotland on leave enjoying catching up with her friends and family. The Church told her not to go back as it was too dangerous but she said:

‘if my girls needed me in times of sunshine how much more they are going to need me in these times of darkness’

She returned only to be betrayed to the Gestapo for protection the Jewish girls and listening to the BBC on her transistor radio.

As the Gestapo led her away she did not want to frighten her girls and for the light to suddenly go out in her lives and said to reassure them to give them a sense of hope and peace:

‘Don’t worry girls I will be back by lunchtime’

This was to be her final blessing to them as she was taken to Auschwitz Concentration Camp where she died. ‘ Lord lettest thou thy servant depart in peace’.

“Jane Haining was a Scot whose story is one of courage and sacrifice.

“She is a beacon of light that highlights the goodness of humankind and must never be forgotten.

Our challenge is perhaps to keep the light shining by doing something with it. The same light that led the Three Kings at epiphany to see the Christ child as being the light of the world, the same light that allowed Simeon to proclaim it as a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel – that light will only be diminished this Candlemas if we do not bring it down from on high and take our blessings out there with us and hopefully become agents of peace. hope and support to those in need and in sharing with others find Christ’s peace in our own hearts.

May God bless this preaching of His Holy word and to his name be all the glory and praise

.. as I come down from the pulpit to place my dove amongst the children’s I say:

‘And now may the Lord bless us and keep us, may the Lord lift up his face to shine upon us and give us peace.’ Amen