

Sermon for Candlemas – 31st January 2021 – on-line

Ps 24; Mal 3.1-5; Heb 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-40

'A life that fits'

I imagine we've all been deeply moved this week by the news that, in the UK alone, more than 100,000 people have died as a result of the coronavirus. Our Archbishops have reminded us that this isn't just an abstract figure - each number is a person: someone we loved and someone who loved us, and I've been moved as I have read some of the tributes on the BBC newsfeed to those who have died, each with a unique life story to tell, a story cut short by the devastating virus that has turned our lives up-side-down this last year. Of course, we all have a unique life story, but for each of us our life story is one that continues to unfold.

Some of you know that within the wider church I have a role helping to discern the calling of people to train for ordained ministry. It's something I greatly enjoy. One of the privileges is to hear the many and varied back stories of those who have wrestled with the sense of God's calling for varying periods of time. And it's not unusual for the people I work with to reach a point in their story where they say in different ways 'I feel I've finally found my place, the life to which God is calling and it fits.' It's always a defining moment and it makes me smile. Whatever the precise words it's a great description. I think we all want to be able to say something like that, don't we? To have a real sense (beyond the specifics of family, work, and whatever else may be happening around us) of what is happening within us and where God is at work in our inner most being.

There are moments in our lives when our senses awaken and open to a greater reality, a larger world, a more whole life. These are the moments when our seeing gives way to recognition and acknowledgment of a deeper and more profound reality. Such times I suggest are moments of presentation, moments of meeting, moments when divinity and humanity touch, and heaven and earth are joined. This is what today, the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, is all about. When we encounter such moments we are living today's gospel (Luke 2:22-40) - We catch a glimpse of what Simeon saw. We stand in his shoes. We see with his eyes.

We've all had those moments, haven't we? We probably don't say, 'Wow! Look! Heaven and earth are joined, humanity and divinity are touching.' We say it differently, but nevertheless that's what's happening. Think about a time when you thought, '*I never want this moment to end.*' That wasn't about the passing of time. It was about presence. You were fully present to the moment, acknowledging perhaps that in some way the pieces of your life had come together. There was an integrity and authenticity - a reality greater than the moment itself.

Or how about this? Have you ever been so immersed in the presence of another person, your work, a hobby, a conversation with a friend, that you lost all track of time? You may have looked at your watch and wondered, 'Where did the time go?' I'm not talking about time that was wasted but time that was full and complete. In such minutes and hours, I suggest we become so absorbed we open ourselves to the eternal.

Maybe you've experienced it this way. You look back on a time in your life and think, 'I don't know how I got through that. I didn't think I would. I didn't think I could.' You don't know how you got through whatever it was, you only know that you did. Such times are moments of presentation, moments of meeting with a presence greater than yourself.

In all these ways and many others like them it might seem as if the moment is presenting itself to us, but I think its just the opposite. We are being presented to the moment. God's Spirit guides and takes us to that place of meeting. We experience the moment but not with our eyes. We hold it but not with our hands. We taste it but not with our tongues. We smell it but not with our nose. We hear it but not with our ears. We encounter a presence greater than our physical senses can experience or understand. That's why the people I work with in vocational discernment often struggle to name what has been going on in their journey and what has changed, yet they know something has changed and they are somehow different. They are no longer just living, they are fully alive.

I think this is what's happening for Simeon in today's Gospel, as he takes the infant, Jesus, in his arms and praises God saying: *Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised; For these eyes of mine have seen the Saviour, whom you have prepared for all the world to see: A Light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.* Simeon saw more than just a child. He looked at the child and he saw salvation. He saw the fulfilment of God's promise. He saw the Lord's Messiah. He saw the Light of God's glory. He saw the freedom to go in peace. He saw the fullness of his own life and it fitted him perfectly.

On this Feast of Meeting, as it is sometimes called, Mary, called Theotokos in Greek, it means God-bearer or God-birther, places her son in the hands of the old man Simeon. He had been waiting for this moment all his life. It's why he went to the temple on this day. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon was being presented to the child he would hold. In that presentation and in that holding, Simeon would be Theodochos, the Greek word which means God-receiver. Simeon is the God-receiver.

Isn't this, at some level, what each of us is searching for, to be 'Theodochos', a God-receiver? Is it not our heart's desire. Whether we fully acknowledge it or not I think that deep down that's why we've logged on to this service today. We too want to hold the child. We too want to be presented. We too want to receive God. We too want to see our salvation and know the fulfilment of God's promises in our own lives. We too want to be set free to go in peace. We too want to try on the life God has called us to and discover that it fits.

Today is not just for or about Simeon. It is also for and about us. All of us have the possibility of becoming God-receivers. Indeed, we are all intended to be God-receivers. The light Simeon sees is not just for himself but for all people, you and me included.

There's something else you might like to ponder about Simeon. Tradition says that when all this happened Simeon was 270 years old and that he was blind. So, what do we do with that? A 270 year old blind man who sees? How can that be?

You might simply wish to dismiss the tradition. You might say it makes no sense. It cannot be. Nobody lives to be 270 and he is either blind or sighted. He can't be both. And at a factual level you'd be right. What if, however, we don't simply dismiss the tradition or try to resolve the factual inconsistencies? What if, instead, we let this paradox be the doorway into the temple of our own life and another way of being, another way of seeing, another way of knowing?

Surely that's what Simeon had to do. If we think we struggle with this paradox imagine Simeon's struggle. God had promised he would not die before he'd seen the Christ. What did Simeon think when he turned 100, 150, 250 years old and still hadn't seen the Messiah? What did he think when he went blind and could no longer see with his eyes?

The truth of this story and the fulfilment of God's promise, for Simeon and for us, do not depend on resolving the contradictions. They are found in the paradox. We spend so much time and effort trying to make life fit by resolving the facts and controlling the circumstances. Simeon didn't do that. Maybe we shouldn't either. He showed up at the temple knowing he was blind and believing he would see. That was enough for Simeon and it was enough for God. Let it be enough for us.

Step into the paradox of a 270 year old blind man who sees the Christ and you will see the invisible, hear the unspoken, smell the odourless, taste the uneaten, and touch the intangible. For these are the sights, the sounds, the fragrance, the taste, and the feel of a life that fits, a life in which heaven and earth are joined and humanity and divinity touch. This morning's Gospel is an invitation to try it on for size, to discover the life God calls you to inhabit and see that it fits.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen