

## Sermon, Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Readings: *Malachi 3.1-5; Hebrews 2.14-end; Luke 2.22-40*



The painting you can see in your order of service is perhaps the last of the great Dutch master, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). Entitled *Simeon with the Infant Christ in the Temple* (1669), it treats the subject of today's Gospel, which he had approached many times before: Mary and Joseph's presentation of Jesus in Jerusalem, in accordance with Jewish law. Yet *this* late painting differs so greatly from its precursors. For, rather than fill his canvas with the splendour and majesty of the great Second Temple, Rembrandt pares back the biblical scene and focusses on just three figures, adumbrated against the cloistering darkness by the light which emanates from the swaddled infant

himself. And it is in the many-hued brush strokes which bring these three characters to life that Rembrandt offers us a profoundly moving interpretation of the event we celebrate today, which is a culmination of our Christmas and Epiphany observance. For Rembrandt captures what St Luke weaves into words: the mysterious, confounding, utterly surprising manifestation of God's action in Christ, which is the foundation for true hope and consolation.

The setting for this surprise was conventional enough: Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to Jerusalem to fulfil the requirements of the Levitical law with respect to purity (Lev. 12.1-4) and to 'redeem' or 'buy back' their firstborn son, who belonged by cultic stipulation to God (Lk. 2.22, cf. Ex. 13.2). At the same time, they would 'present' him, first to God, then to God's people, at the symbolic meeting place between the two – the Temple, where God was in the midst of his chosen nation. St Luke reminds us of all of this in the first verses of today's Gospel (2.22-24), but then moves immediately to subvert our expectations. For this will be not an occasion for Mary's purification, but rather the revealing of the One through whom *we* are made pure; likewise Jesus will not be 'redeemed' from God for the customary five shekels, but rather handed over, presented, *offered* wholly to God as the One through whose self-offering *our* redemption is wrought. And as the infant Christ is brought to the Temple – the dwelling place of God – Jesus is revealed as the One in whom the fullness of God dwells, in whom we see and know the Father in the unity of the Spirit, who is the place of atonement, of reunion and reconciliation between God and humankind (Heb. 2.17). Everything has been turned upside down, inside out. Like Jesus' Baptism at the hands of John, or Christ's first sign at the wedding in Cana, we find ourselves contemplating a scene which shines out unexpectedly from its own setting, and draws us into its narrative, inviting our response.

All of this is concentrated on, and rendered in beautifully familiar words by, the ageing Simeon. Rembrandt's close focus on the loveable bearded figure is an inspired way to tell the whole sweep of the wider story. Simeon was a prayerful seeker, who was guided by God's Spirit, and who watched and waited for the 'consolation' he understood God had promised his people (Lk 2.25, cf. Isa. 40.1, 52.9). We are told he was a 'righteous' or 'just' man (Lk 2.25), yet our modern words often fail to convey the rich biblical picture of the 'just' person, which is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. Psalm 1, for example, tells us that the 'just' person 'delights in the law of the Lord' (v.2), and is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which constantly brings forth fruit. The water here represents the living Word of God, so the picture we have of someone like Simeon is, as Pope Benedict put it, of one whose 'life is spent in dialogue with God and who therefore brings forth constant fruit' from the living waters of God's Word, which is their deep, inner joy and constant inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Simeon strove to offer his life and energies to God, to attune himself to God's voice and movement. He waited for a glimpse of the promised Messiah. Look again at the peace, the warm, attentive poise of Simeon's aged face, as Rembrandt paints him: here is a good man, and a wise sentinel. Here, in a single man, is an image of the faithfulness and diligence by which all of God's people were called to live.

It is *because* he is open to God's word, inwardly disposed and attentive to the ever-surprising voice of God, that Simeon perceives what must have seemed impossible. Whilst so many others placed their hope in a great conquering hero to crown their triumphs and usher in God's kingdom by blood and the blade – and not least those zealous nationalists who haunted the Temple precincts, with whom Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p.87.

would later clash (Lk. 19.45-48; Jn 2.15) – Simeon is alive and awake in his physical frailty to a truth stranger and literally more disarming. He sees it now, as Mary brings the child and offers two turtle doves, the sacrifice required of the poor (Lk 2.24). The great comfort and consolation of his people *is here*, arising not from the mighty, but from the lowly, from the poor among God’s chosen. And within even this unpromising cast, Simeon is moved by the Spirit to recognise that God’s promise is fulfilled not in a diehard or revolutionary, but in a vulnerable, powerless infant, into whose eyes he now looks as he holds him with tender care.

And what does he see? Not a plan. Not the potential for great strength. Not a king, nor a messiah, at least as so many of his contemporaries would use those words. No, what he sees, and what even his weak eyes sense bathing him in light and energy, is a *perfect offering of love*. He sees a life perfectly animated by, and attuned to, God’s own endless loving delight. He sees this perfect reflection of God’s love in a human face which looks at him; and he sees those infant eyes seeing *in him* the image of God he had spent his whole life discerning, summoning him to grow into that image, to partake in the love for which he was made. Look for a moment at the light which radiates from the infant Christ, soaking into Simeon’s wrinkled skin and wispy beard. This is always what it means to encounter Christ in prayer, scripture, and sacrament: to feel his love warm us as sun on the face. To see him see *in us* the image of the Father, to which we are called. To respond to his invitation to the fullness of life, which begins with liberation from the pride and fear with which we disguise our vulnerability.

Simeon can depart. His own death is but part of the offering of love in which he may now rest; it completes a life lived as a discernment of that offering. ‘My eyes have seen your salvation’, he acclaims, ‘a light

for revelation to the whole world, and for glory to your people Israel'. Yet even as he speaks those words, there plays a haunting minor chord, for his quotation of the prophet Isaiah lifts phrases from the passages known to many as the songs of the suffering servant (Isa. 42, 49, 50, 52-53). The perfect offering of love which animates Christ's flesh must carry that body through a world mired, entrapped, and armed by sin. In such a world, Christ's own perfect love will 'be a sign of contradiction' (Lk 2.34), laying bare and placing under judgement the principalities and powers premised upon manipulation, division, and control (cf. Mal. 3.2-3, 5). Today's feast points forward to the Cross, because it raises the truth that love will meet condemnation and challenge in a world under the sway of sin. To align oneself with perfect love is always to be wounded, to have one's heart pierced as with a sword, for it must mean facing with honesty all that works against God's purposes in fallen creation; more than that, it means *feeling* the sting of this conflict wherever we meet its terrible effects. Christian compassion stood in marked contrast to callous indifference towards the suffering of others in the ancient world, and that posture remains as central to our witness now as then. To be animated by God's love is to enter into the divine compassion, to be drawn all the more to those who weep and wait anxiously, those who are crushed and those who fail.

Yet this is no counsel of despair. Rembrandt's masterful strokes do not let the darkness overcome the light which shines now from the Christ-child. After all, as Simeon knows, the offering of love in Christ is no *mere* human thing. It is God's own life, offered endlessly and inexhaustibly for the healing and restoration and reconciliation of God's people and the whole cosmos. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Christ enters into the whole human lot, including its worst tragedies and alienations and sins, so that *from there*,

God's own ceaseless restorative life can offer again the love that remakes and reclothes in promise (Heb. 2.17-18, cf. Rom. 8).

This is why today we *celebrate* this confounding, surprising manifestation, as we have celebrated Christ's revelation in mystery time and again from Christmas through Epiphany-tide. For we do not place our trust in the light *we* can shine on the world, to illuminate and fix, to diagnose and control; no, we, like Simeon, bask in the strange light by which we see afresh a new world, remade and restored to its original purpose: a sharing in divine delight. We, like Simeon, are greeted, here and now, by that life of perfect love which is Jesus Christ; we now, and every day, must behold, receive, and open ourselves to its illumination and energy, so that our lives might stand as beacons of that light for the whole world. As Shakespeare puts it in *Measure for Measure*: 'Heaven doth with us as we with torches do / Not light for themselves; for if our virtues / Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike / As if we had them not'. Light and glory are in our midst in Jesus Christ, shining through God's people as they go about God's work of loving, peace-making, mourning, showing mercy, forgiving, and rejoicing. May we come ever more to shine with the radiance that first lit faithful Simeon's face.

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