

# Destined

a sermon preached on

## Candlemas: The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Sunday 31 January 2010

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

The religious feeling has a distinctly compelling quality. Those who experience what might variously be called 'faith', 'belief', 'spirit', characteristically describe it in terms of irresistibility. The most obvious analogy, supremely expressed in the 'Song of Solomon', is that of falling in love. The experience is utterly compelling, such that lovers feel as though they have no choice. This feeling is so potent, so overwhelming, as to produce astonishing behavioural responses – lovers overlook all potential obstacles, even to the point of apparent irrationality, possibly even giving themselves over to seemingly-insurmountable odds, each compelled by the other. Truly, this is the madness of love. This 'madness' is responsible for eliciting a startling range of emotional impossibilities, even in the face of suffering and evil: hope, love, generosity, forgiveness, joy, peace, and so on.

Of course, there is a dark side to all this. Who could doubt that this madness drives some over the edge, not only beyond reason but beyond humanity? And, not surprisingly, when the fever of love has passed the lover is prone to the exact opposite of the feelings which love fuels – despair, hatred, greed, unforgiveness, depression, war, and so on.

The religious feeling, which is ultimately more an expression of love than of reason, is thus compelling, capable also of eliciting both the highest and the lowest human responses. When we experience this it feels as though we have no choice in the matter. Having experienced the fire of the Divine in our souls, it is as though there is no turning away from it. We are all like Moses before the burning bush on Horeb, the mountain of God - the Divine fire so compels that even if we turn away, yet we feel compelled to turn again towards it.<sup>1</sup>

It is this sense of the Divine fire and the lover's feeling of being compelled by it which we observe in the infant of Bethlehem who is man of Calvary. When the grateful and overjoyed old man Simeon says of this 40 day old infant: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed,"<sup>2</sup> it sounds to our ears as though the child Jesus has no choice about his life. In line with the prophetic thread which runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures' depiction of the nation Israel, as well as throughout the gospels account of the man Jesus – it sounds as though Israel had no choice in the matter but to be the chosen people, and it sounds as though Jesus had no choice in the matter but to be "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people."<sup>3</sup>

Was Jesus 'compelled', destined against his wishes, to be tested and to suffer, just so that we might be saved from ourselves? Certainly it may seem so. It can appear as though the religious feeling is so compelling, from the point of view of both the nation Israel as well as the man Jesus, as to remove all choice. Overwhelmed by the compulsion of love, the beloved feels as though there is only one course of action in response to the Lover.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:34

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 2:17b

Anyone who has experienced the religious feeling, or if you like, the madness of love, immediately recognises this feeling of 'compulsion'. The witness of all religious traditions, to some extent, and certainly the Christian tradition, repeatedly testifies to this reality – Bernard, Francis, Hildegard, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Charles de Foucauld, Mother Theresa, Teilhard de Chardin – the list could go on all day!

It's also true that much of the vast theological edifice is spent attempting to deal with the inevitable obvious conundrum – if the religious feeling so compels, then what of human freedom? Well, entire libraries have been written attempting to solve that intellectual problem, and I have no intention of straying into that philosophical minefield. Call that avoidance if you like, but I just can't see the point. I can't see the point in defending human freedom, as though its existence needs to be proved, any more than I can see the point in defending the reality of the religious experience, as though that needs to be proved also.

What does interest me is that as a consequence of this compelling religious feeling Jesus, according to not only old Simeon but also Luke the evangelist and the other evangelists, as well as to the prophets, is destined for something. Because if Jesus is destined for something – then those who are made in his Divine image and likeness; those who are members of his Body; those who are baptised into his death and resurrection and made new in the Spirit; those who are "his sisters and brothers in every respect"<sup>4</sup> - these too must be destined for something. To paraphrase Meister Eckhart, from yet another angle: 'What good is it to me if Jesus is destined for the fall and rising of many, if I too am not also similarly destined?'

All our liturgies and our creeds and our Scriptures and our doctrines and our Tradition are the handmaid of this overarching purpose. The religious feeling which compels us, which fires and animates all our prayer and reading and ethical action, is the work of the same Spirit Jesus breathes down from the cross and through the locked doors of the upper room. Our work as the beloved is to respond to that love which refuses to let us go with all that we have and all that we are – the precise contours of which will be as infinitely varied as we are infinitely different. Our life and work is the freely-offered sacrifice as 'appointed by the law'; the revelation incarnate in our flesh; the glory of God expressed by being fully human, fully alive; the sign which will reveal in our own hearts the dual aspect of our nature, the sign of rising and falling which is at the heart of all reality. This is the sign which discriminates, a sword which pierces and divides, which differentiates all reality, the destined differentiation which is the precursor of the evolution of human consciousness. This compelling, destined sign, which the beloved freely embraces, incarnate in all flesh, is the salvation of our own souls.

As with the response of the beloved to the Lover, one can hardly fathom such an impenetrable mystery as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the incarnation of the Divine in human flesh – any more than one can fathom how the young lover's description of his beloved as a "red, red rose". Rather, just as the infant Christ is presented by his faithful parents at the Jerusalem Temple, so compelled by the religious impetus, the work of Love, we too present ourselves also as living sacrifices, divinely appointed, destined for the revealing of the thoughts of hearts, which is the revelation of the mystery of the Kingdom. Truly, it is the madness of Love which compels those who are willing to be open to this great sign.

Pray that, like Jesus, willingly consenting to this Divine compelling, this destiny, who "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him,"<sup>5</sup> so, too, may we who on this feast of Candlemas bear his light from Crib to Font, also come to experience the Divine compelling fulfil that which the same Spirit reveals through and in us.

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

---

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 2:17a

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:40