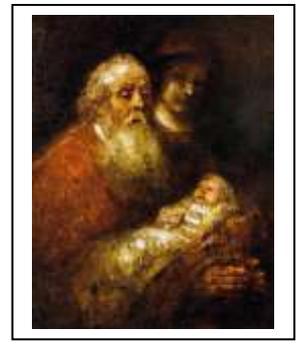


**Beginnings and Endings**  
**Presentation of Jesus**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
**4 February 2018**

*Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-18*  
*Luke 2:22-40*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

My first Sunday with you three years ago was Candlemas and as I got out my service booklet from that day, I realised I had written all over the first page as Carole gave me a quick-fire introduction to setting up at St Luke's. It wasn't that I'd never done it before, I'd been doing it for years; it was just that as you know, every church does it differently! I was amused to see I'd written 'buy pita bread – not garlic!' and 'the bread holder is like a thing for muffins'! Now of course it is all very familiar.

But it seems somehow appropriate that I begin and end my ministry among you on this feast of Candlemas, the end of the Epiphany season, but also telling the story of beginnings and endings within Luke's gospel.

I love how the infancy narratives of Luke are book-ended by two elderly couples: Zechariah and Elizabeth who become the parents of John the Baptist, and then Simeon and Anna who exercise a prophetic ministry in discerning that among the many infants probably presented at the temple that day, that the six week old baby Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one who will bring and be the consolation of Israel (v25), the redemption of Jerusalem (v38). It's been suggested that these four 'senior citizens' as we might call them nowadays, were 'the midwives of a new age' (*Cloth for the Cradle, Wild Goose Worship Group, Iona, Scotland*). And of course over the centuries and in so many cultures still today, the older women of the community are present at both the births and deaths, bringing to birth new life and easing the passage through death to the new beginning which is a mystery to us all.

This week I have taken my last services at Bishopspark, Resthaven and St Albans Retirement Village, and honoured there those who are our Senior Saints, those coming towards the end of a lifetime of faith. I had a lovely chat with an elderly man who talked of his Methodist roots, and fortunately we'd just sung one of the great Wesley hymns, Love Divine! I want to express my thanks publicly on your behalf to Michaela who has been so faithful in supporting these resthome services over the years I have been here, she's wonderful with names, and leading some singing if I'm running late, and shows great pastoral care – she was quick to tell me the other day though that she is only a Junior Senior Saint!

As I come to the end of my ministry among you, I want to express my thanks to you all, for all that you have been to me as the saints of St Luke's. I have valued enormously in coming back to a still shaky and evolving Christchurch, the stability of our rhythms of prayer and worship, following through the seasons of the church year with a faithfulness which earths us even midst the vagaries of the 'four seasons in one day' Christchurch weather!

I have valued the wisdom and maturity and life experience which you have shared with me and with one another. Many of you live with health challenges, and have faced over recent years enormous changes in your living context, moving homes, moving out for repairs to be done, grieving that which is lost, not least your beloved St Luke's church. I have admired deeply your courage, your fortitude, your bloody-mindedness in 'keeping calm and carrying on', even midst deep weariness and frustration at delays and hiccups. I am sad that we haven't as yet been able to fulfil the vision of a St Luke's spirituality centre back on the site, but I am also hugely grateful for what we have been able to **be** as the St Luke's community and Spirituality Centre enfolded. We have not been able to continue everything, but we have not done nothing; we have not put our lives on hold, as we have sought to **be** the body of Christ here, and wherever we have been throughout the city, whether that's been in our places of worship, or a café, or in our homes or out in the community at work, in voluntary service and at play.

I came across an article this week speaking about people with *gravitas* – I was attracted to it initially as my Latvian grandfather's name was Gravitis but then I read further. The author Craig Barnes spoke about his Sunday School teacher who had taught with flannelgraph, and he remembered her bony fingers smoothing the Biblical figures down on the felt, and how the characters ended up stained and even taped together, when there'd been a fight over who would put them up on the board, and someone's (flannelgraph) head was ripped off! He commented both the Biblical characters and us end up stained and taped together as we go through life.

The author went on to speak of the attraction of people with gravitas, and I want to quote some of it, as this is what I have found and valued within this St Luke's community:

"People with gravitas have weighty souls, and we're drawn to them as we are to all things with gravitational pull. Typically they're older, but it's not their age as much as their maturity that we find so attractive. These people have scars, which are strangely attractive, but not open wounds. They've settled into themselves, and those they're given to love, without more futile plans for recreating what God has already called "good". But they have a persevering thirst to find every glimpse they can get of that good.

No one is born with gravitas...it comes as a result of prayerful responses to hurts, failures, sins, and endless waiting, which are all surrendered to the relentless dream of using their fleeting years for something that makes a holy difference in the world...Those with gravitas relentlessly pursued sacredness at every hard turn in life. Along the way, their weighty souls emerged as a blessing.”<sup>1</sup> So thank you for your gravitas, your weighty souls.

Bill Wallace, whose hymns have blessed us, speaks in our Table hymn today of beginnings and endings in words that are worth pondering:

“Beginnings form the ending’s womb, with ending’s power to change;  
Embrace the Spirit’s flowing path – God’s power to rearrange”.

Sometimes we find it hard to follow the Spirit’s flowing path; it feels more like a flood sweeping away all in its path, including us, or a dry and dusty river bed where we struggle to find and follow the meandering stream, to find the way ahead. God’s power to rearrange is not always as we might like.

And yet as we come to this year, with all its unknowns for us all, may we have the faith and faithfulness of Simeon and Anna who were given new hope and promise through their meeting with a tiny infant and his young parents.

The Eastern Orthodox part of the Church calls this feast “The Meeting”, a deceptively simple title, and yet one which is profound in all it points to of the Meeting of divine with human, transcendent God with human flesh at its most vulnerable in a six week old baby, the meeting of old with young, prophet with priest, male with female, the promise of Christ as revelation to the Gentiles and glory to God’s people Israel. Christ is the one in whom all these polarities meet, ‘Alpha and Omega he’, Christ, the beginning and the end. For a time here, you and I have been part of a ‘meeting together’ in Christ. I will now be moving on, returning to Nelson and my family, moving on into God’s future for me. Some among us too are feeling called in new directions, and to be part of new communities. I pray that we will respect and honour each one’s decision and release those ‘weighty souls’ to bring the love and light of Christ wherever they are called, just as I pray you will do that for me.

Most of all I pray that on this day, this day of beginnings and endings, that we will give thanks to God for all that we have been to each other in “The Meeting” we have shared together, the experiences of life and faith, the joys and sorrows, the tears and laughter. As we share eucharist together in that ultimate meeting of divine and human, spiritual and material, the body of Christ shared among the body of Christ, may we commend one another into God’s safe care and keeping, confident that God holds our future and our faith journey in trustworthy hands, just as Simeon and Anna held the Christ Child. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Barnes, ‘People with gravitas’ in The Christian Century, January 22, 2018.