

Sunday 2nd February 2020 Candlemas

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5; Heb 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

Reflection

What do an elderly man, a widow of great age, a simple carpenter and a young mother have in common? The first answer that comes to *my* mind is Faithfulness!

But what does ‘faithfulness’ mean? How do we recognize it? How do we live it?

In today’s gospel, as we enter Jerusalem’s Temple with Mary and Joseph, we enter (at least) three stories of great faithfulness.

First, the faithfulness of a poor family – Mary and Joseph - bringing their first-born male (Jesus) to be dedicated to the Lord, as required by the law of Moses. While there, young Mary also fulfils the Jewish rites of purification, bringing pigeons to be sacrificed for her own cleansing. I wonder how she felt as she entered the huge temple courts, and approached the priest carrying her fragile bundle of human Godliness? Was she anxious, proud, bewildered, grateful?

I wonder how Mary felt when she heard the elderly Simeon’s words – words that identified her son as the Messiah: *“for my eyes have seen your salvation.....**a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...**”*

and then those *piercing* words especially for her:

“ ...and a sword will pierce your own soul too”

Being a parent brings *these* words to life for me.

Confronted with the miracle of life, we are also confronted with its fragility, and the reality of death in all Creation. Our hearts bleed when we consider new parents in places of famine, conflict, poor sanitation, or pandemic. What brings *them* hope in the face of despair? Where is *their* light in the darkness?

I remember poignant moments with my own new babies – a certain realization that their lives would embrace joy and sorrow, things outside of my control. I remember the constant awareness of their vulnerability – checking that they were still breathing as they slept in their cots! - checking their temperature, worrying if they were late waking for a feed. I had to consider the heart-rending possibility of their death, serious illness or debilitating disability.

But it was at such times that God seemed closest – the One in whom I entrusted my babies, whatever lay ahead. And now, with those children grown, partnered (and in one case parenting), that sense of committing my *adult* children to God’s care – in times of rejoicing, struggle *and* sorrow - is even stronger. Sometimes *all* we *can* do, is let go, and let God.

And for Mary, the piercing of *her* soul – the bittersweet prophecy of Simeon – must have been overwhelming. And yet, in faithfulness, she had said “Yes” to God, and with Joseph’s faithful support, risked the pain of birthing, nurturing – and letting go of – pure, enfleshed Love.

The faithfulness of Simeon too, leaps out of the pages of the gospel: *'righteous and devout, guided by the Holy Spirit'* – an elderly man, living in community, steeped in prayer and praise. An aging man probably carrying aches and pains, declining abilities, and his share of life's griefs and sorrows – yet a man alert to God's whisper - open, watching, waiting - ready to embrace Love and hold it in his arms.

Imagine Simeon – eyes shining, face alight, gazing upon the child held in the crook of his arms:

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann. (*Ka-si-mon*) reflects on faithful Simeon's words in this way:

'One single beam of his light in our existence seems to me more important than the full sun of any orthodoxy. For what is decisive for all time is not how much we have believed, but that we have believed and followed him, however little we may have understood about him.'

I have met a Simeon or two on my own faith journey - I wonder who the 'Simeons' are in your life? I wonder who the 'Simeons' are this parish?

Simeon helps remind *me* to hold God's Love tenderly, ready to pass it on to others.

And thirdly, in Luke's intergenerational encounter in the Temple, we meet Anna – the prophet of great age, many years a widow. No widow's benefit, medical insurance or residential care facilities. She could so easily have been a bitter, resentful widow, turning her back on hope, possibility, life and love. And yet she remained faithful to her community and her Lord, worshipping in the Temple. I wonder how many other widows and young mothers she encouraged with her presence and her words?

I have known 'Anna(s)' too – women of great (and lesser) age, women who have known life's hardships and deep sorrow, yet are present to others, women faithful in worship and word who have discovered the joy of faithfulness.

The faithful Simeons and Annas in our lives and congregations offer *us* encouragement and nurture *our* faith. Their commitment to simply *being* there, in turning up to church Sunday by Sunday – or their commitment to listening, watching and celebrating God's Emmanuel presence, in surprising places and surprising people, is *their* precious gift to us.

As eleventh century Cistercian Abbot, Gueric of Ignyⁱⁱ wrote:

'Behold then, the candle alight in Simeon's hands. You must light your own candles by enkindling them at His, those lamps which the Lord commanded you to bear in your hands. So come to Him and be enlightened - that you do not so much bear lamps as become them, shining within yourself and radiating light to your neighbours.

Perhaps we too, can be faithful Simeons and Annas to others. And what of our new and evolving generations, facing climate crises, global insecurity, overpopulation and nationalism to name a few challenges. How can we bless our newest inhabitants on this beautiful earth, speaking hope into their lives?

The now deceased Presbyterian pastor and poet David Steele reflected and wrote about Simeonⁱⁱⁱ. In a poem, he recalls hearing that Simeon, a bit of a codger, was going back and forth to the Temple every day in his final years, pronouncing that very same blessing over *all the babies* presented to him. It's meant to be funny, this image of Simeon, but then, suddenly, the poet becomes serious and says this:

‘When I read the blessing
And thought about it,
I began to wish he was right,
About Simeon--and those babies.
And I began thinking about *our* babies.

And I wished someone,
Some Simeon,
Might hold my grandbabies high--
And yours--
The born ones and the not yet
Proclaiming to them
With great conviction,
"You are the saviours of the World!"
Meaning it so absolutely
Those young 'uns would live it,
And love it,
And make it happen!’

What does ‘faithfulness’ mean? How do we recognize it? How do we live it?

‘So come to Him and be enlightened - that you do not so much bear lamps as become them’

Let us pray:

O Gracious God, bless those of us who are old, those of us who are young, and those of us who find ourselves every place in between. Give us such grace that we might lift our children high and that we might receive our children in crook’d arms and offer a blessing upon them that they might know they *are* the saviours of the world, for we have seen *your* salvation. You are a light unto us, a light to all people. In your name we pray. Amen.

Helen Roud

ⁱ Ernst Käsemann in Falla, Terry C. *Be Our Freedom Lord*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, (1994) p.282

ⁱⁱ Prayer by Guerric of Igny c.1070-1157 (Hungary)

ⁱⁱⁱ In Lewicki, David. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002fc5/joy_comes_in_the_evening (2012)