

Luke 2:22-40 — The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"^[a]), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."^[a]

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss^[a] your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^[a] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

One of my favourite Christian books is called Christianity Rediscovered. It's about a missionary to the Maasai, who — after years watching other Christians build hospitals and schools but failing to win converts — just goes to each of the nearby Maasai settlements in turn and asks if they can talk about God. They are glad to, and so they continue to talk, week by week.

But in the process he discovers that the practice of his faith, including the peace and communion and many other aspects, does not relate to the Maasai: it makes no sense to them. They are culturally too far removed. So he has to translate his faith into their terms. While we find spitting disgusting, for a Maasai spit is a sacred sign of forgiveness. Meanwhile, out goes communion in the form of bread and wine, because these foods are alien to the Maasai. But the meaning of communion, the self-giving of Christ, remains the same, just as the shared nature of communion and the 'being in Christ' aspect remain. And these are more important. Vincent Donovan, the missionary in question, also had issues of Biblical translation — while the Judaeo-Christian tradition is steeped in history, and requires a degree of knowledge of this in order to understand *all* the depths of meaning in the Bible the cultural distance was too great for the Maasai. For a start, they don't grow grain or crops at all. Indeed they look down on arable farmers. So the parable of the sower is one of many casualties in translation. It doesn't make sense to the Maasai where they are.

But crucially, Donovan found that he could dispense with so much of the stuff of the gospels but still talk of a universal, loving God, who became incarnate in Christ, who bore our sins on the cross, who died and rose again, and with whom believers can have an eternal relationship. He wrote this story not only because it was interesting and an important contribution to modern missiological theory, but because he saw it as relevant to the discussion of bringing the gospel to children and youth. He could see that western culture had developed, diversified and changed so rapidly that the language and practice that has drawn this generation into church is another world to that of today's children. And our hope, our dream, our goal — if we are children of God, and love as he has loved us — is to share that love, and the source of that love, with all people, and all generations.

How does this relate to today's readings, and the presentation of Christ in the temple?

Two ways.

In the gospel we have a very small child, some very old people and some parents who are somewhere in between. This passage is a meeting of generations. The child is a very special child, of course — but this is a moment in which a child is welcome at the centre of worship and great hope is put on his shoulders.

But that child was not left to his own devices. He was taught, not least at the family meal table, for Judaism is a faith in which practice centres more on the home than the synagogue. It is hard to say that Jesus would not have become who he became if it were not for welcome of children into worship — but perhaps this will be enough to make us think how some children, and indeed some adults, may never develop a lively faith because they never heard the gospel in terms that made sense to them?

And secondly — we hear Simeon's famous lines, 'Lord you let your servant depart in peace...' in which he describes Jesus as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'.

Simeon sees that Jesus is not about salvation for a chosen few, but for all people, he came to be a revelation to the people who were not the 'in-crowd'. Mission continues to share that light around the world today, and in the most prohibitive circumstances we hear reports of Christian faith flourishing. But as Vincent Donovan, our Maasai missionary, has signalled — our culture changes so quickly that for many children, and their parents too, Christianity is another and an alien world. What are we prepared to do make that world welcoming and knowable?

There is a balance to strike here. If we only couch the gospel in the most childish terms, in order to be approachable to kids, we may never mature as Christians. But if we never seek to make church accessible we will never see new Christians sharing the faith that we cherish, and we will never mature, because our worship is in danger of being self-serving. This is something we should talk about, and pray about.

As Christ is our light, so let us reflect that light in all directions, so that all generations — young, and middling and old may see Christ in us, and come to him.

Amen.

Yoxmere Benefice Lent Course at Darsham Village Hall Monday 27th February, 2pm — and for the next five weeks, also available on Zoom 7.45 Monday evenings