

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST

31.1.10 at St Mary's

The passage we have just heard on the Presentation of Christ in the temple is remarkably evocative. Firstly, it evokes reflection on what the Lukan text may signify, secondly it evokes awareness of the rich liturgical traditions that have grown from it, and thirdly it evokes a reminder of the profound power that the symbol of light has on our spiritual life.

The narratives in the first two chapters of Luke evoke the world of old Israel. There is something of their literary content - style and vocabulary - which is similar to the Septuagint. The same goes for the characters, the scenario in the temple and the stories. Luke seems set on telling us that, new though the actual arrival of Jesus is in the unfolding of God's purposes, he is no bolt from the blue. Though Jesus' saving message is for all, the people of Israel still have special mention.

The central characters, Simeon and Anna, typify the great sages of the Old Testament, and their age underlines their wisdom and their capacity to speak God's truth. They also evoke the divine favouring of piety, poverty and simplicity of many spirit-led characters of the Old Testament. Simeon's words have huge scriptural allusion. This seems to be more important to Luke than the ritual Jesus' parents have come to carry out. It may be that the presentation in the temple was not absolutely essential, but Mary's purification, which entailed sacrifice, was what Luke wished to emphasise.

It seems likely that Luke had two purposes here. Firstly to show the position of Jesus in scripture in relation to doctrine (God's work continues through all time). Secondly to remind readers that the church at the end of the first Century contained an increasingly small number of Jewish Christians, and many more gentile Christians, who sometimes showed intolerance to Jews. Luke seeks, both here and in Acts, to provide a sense of balance and reconciliation.

Above all else, Luke reminds us that Jesus is the focus of faith and hope. He brings salvation, a word that is rarely found except in Luke. But Jesus' purpose will be revealed through the suffering that Simeon foresees. And this suffering will shake Mary to the core. The image of the sword piercing Mary's soul is an example of the contribution that Lukan texts have made, among other things,

to the development of Marian devotion down the centuries.

Today, forty days after Christmas, we celebrate an important and integral part of the liturgical cycle for Christmas. Epiphany is in a sense an appendix to the twelve days of Christmas, and today is a turning point in the Christian year from Christmas towards Lent. Some of the central themes of the gospel for today have been a rich source of inspiration for a variety of liturgical provisions down the centuries: presentation, purification, meeting, light for the world. The various names of this festival are a sign of this richness: presentation, purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and most commonly, Candlemas, a medieval expression from northern Europe, linking the Eucharist with a procession of candles.

Today is a day with a bitter-sweet character. The revelation of the infant Jesus calls for rejoicing. But Simeon's prophetic words, the rising and falling of many and the sword that will pierce, lead more potently and directly than any we have heard before in the Christmas season, to the passion and to Easter. Thus today is pivotal in the Christian year: the liturgical colour, white, reminds us that this is a last look at Christmas, and in some places purple has been used with striking effect in part of today's service to emphasise the more penitential character of what is to come in Lent. In the eastern part of Christendom today is called *Hypapante*, which means meeting, the meeting of the five, a sign of the new community. In many parts of the Christian world it is usual to have a procession with candles today, during which the *Nunc Dimittis*, the Song of Simeon, is sung. This song has been said or sung from the earliest times as a canticle at the evening office. In recent centuries it has been set to a great range of music. Very often that music comes to a crescendo with the words that stress that Christ is a light, for revelation to the world. The light of the world. After singing the *Nunc Dimittis*, the congregation may face towards the font, the fundamentally important place of our baptism, the candles are blown out and the turning from Christmas to the passion is stated, before the dismissal. In my last parish we had a tradition of retaining the Christmas tree until today, to emphasise the continuity of the season of Christmas for forty days. On this day we removed the branches during the Eucharist and formed a cross out of the trunk and the longest branch. This cross was kept throughout Lent in church as a symbol of the passage of the church year.

The power of symbols has been known and used throughout Christian history, and perhaps none more so than the light from

candles. Such light has illuminated worship practically, and can be used variously as a reminder of God's presence among us at the altar, during the reading of the gospel, near the aumbry, where consecrated bread and wine are stored for use with the sick and the dying, and at the end of baptism, and as a sign of prayer in the church or at home.

In the fourth gospel Jesus is recorded as saying that those who follow him will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. The light of life can mean either the light that issues from the source of life, or the light that gives life to us, or both. Thus, Jesus is the very light of God that has come among us, and Jesus is the light that gives us life. As William Barclay once wrote, "just as a flower can never blossom when it never sees the sunlight, so our lives can never flower with the grace and beauty they ought to have, until they are irradiated with the light of the presence of Christ". May that light of Christ always shine on us and may we reflect that light to everyone we meet. Amen.