

28th December: First Sunday after Christmas Day

Isaiah 61.10–62.3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 2.22-40

Three days ago we welcomed a lot of people through our doors that we don't normally see. Christmas brings these people to us for different reasons. For some, a time staying with family includes coming to church. Others like singing the carols, or being in the church in candlelight, or remembering Christmases past. Still others feel a deep connection with the Christmas story or with its message of peace and goodwill in a troubled world. We don't of course know why everyone comes, but the fact they do come makes them part of our church's story.

For my own part, I never feel that Christmas has really begun until I've heard a sermon about the 'true meaning' of Christmas! However, you may well be relieved that I'm not giving a sermon like that today. This is because, when we dig beneath the surface of our Gospel reading, we see that people come to worship for different reasons and find different meanings. It's easy for preachers and commentators to oversimplify these or get confused about what they are.

We hear in Luke's Gospel that Jesus's parents Mary and Joseph came with their baby to Jerusalem for at least two different purposes. First, Luke tells us that they 'brought him up to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord'. The background here is the law of Moses, which said that a woman's first child must be offered to the Lord (Ex. 13). This offering was in memory of the Exodus, when the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt after the firstborn Egyptian children had been killed. The Israelites showed their thanks to God for releasing them from slavery by bringing their first child to the Temple to serve God there. But when the Temple changed how it appointed priests, child recruits weren't needed and parents could make a donation there instead. If Joseph was in charge of the money in Jesus's family this was a reason for him to go to the Temple. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians, Jesus was born under the law and so his parents needed to fulfil its requirements. However, they didn't need to bring the baby Jesus himself to the Temple when making the donation.

So we have a possible reason for Joseph going to the Temple, but why did Mary come along too? This moves us onto the second reason the family travelled to Jerusalem. Mary came to the Temple for purification, as Luke tells us 'according to the law of Moses'. The purification of Mary was separate from the presentation of Jesus. According to the Law, a woman was unclean for a set period after giving birth: forty days for a boy, or eighty days for a girl. After this she had to go to a priest at the Temple with a lamb and a bird (either a pigeon or a turtle-dove). The priest would offer these on her behalf and she would be clean. However, if a woman couldn't afford a lamb she could, like Mary, give two birds instead (Lev. 12). We might ask why Mary needed to make this offering if, as the Angel Gabriel had told her, she'd conceived Jesus not in the normal way but by the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1.35). There's been a strong tradition in churches of seeing Mary as spotlessly clean and pure, which makes it seem odd that she needed purifying after giving birth to Jesus. However, the Jews recognised that giving birth to a baby was a messier business than conceiving one, and Mary went through childbirth the same way as other mothers.

So we have Joseph coming to the Temple with the family's donation and Mary visiting for purification. But why did Jesus come too? Luke probably wasn't a Jew and didn't live in a Jewish area, so gets confused about the current Jewish practices. Despite what he says, it hadn't been the rule for centuries that children like Jesus had to be presented at the Temple (Num. 18.15-16)—although, for practical reasons, it might have been easiest for Jesus to go out with his parents rather than be left at home with a child-minder! However, the Temple was a really important place for Jesus. Indeed, Luke describes how, around the time he was born, Joseph and Mary travelled for a census from Nazareth to Bethlehem, then on the short distance to Jerusalem to make the donation and for Mary's purification. So this story of Jesus' birth is based around a journey to the Temple, and in today's Gospel this journey is completed. Jesus arrives at the Temple in order to be acknowledged as fulfilling the law and the prophets. While the family are there together doing what the law requires,

Simeon comes to them and proclaims Jesus as the source of salvation for all, a light of glory for the Jews and a light of revelation to the Gentiles. Jesus, he says, is the Messiah for whom the Jews have been waiting, both for their own salvation and for that of the world. Jesus is the person about whom Isaiah speaks, who has clothed himself with the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness, and who shines like a burning torch. The prophet Anna then arrives, praising God and speaking more about Jesus. Luke doesn't put words into her mouth, but perhaps she would have used language like that of Psalm 148, which speaks of cattle, stars, the angelic host and kings all praising God for his goodness to his people, as they did at Jesus's birth.

This isn't to say that what Jesus represents is easy or straightforward. Simeon describes him as a sign that will be opposed, revealing the hostile, unbelieving and doubting thoughts of those who contradict his message. This can be painful for those who, like his mother Mary, recognise the truth for which he stands like a sword piercing their soul. In these days following Christmas, several festivals occur that remind us of this: the martyrdoms of Saint Stephen on Boxing Day, of the Holy Innocents today, and of Saint Thomas Becket of Canterbury tomorrow. Then on New Year's Day we remember the first time that the blood of Jesus himself was shed, at his Circumcision. During the Christmas holiday it can be tempting to forget these festivals but we shouldn't, because they bring sharply into our minds the reality of where the Gospel message can lead.

So Joseph, Mary and Jesus don't quite come to worship for the reasons that we're told. Moreover, Simeon hints at the further consequences of their arrival that only time will fully reveal. Nevertheless, the holy family are seen and received by ordinary people, especially elderly people, with extravagant warmth. There's encouragement here for our own welcome to families, called to worship after sometimes long journeys and for a rich variety of reasons. It's right that children—at least sometimes!—get a fair bit of attention, as they bring us so much.

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