



31st January 2021
4th Sunday of Epiphany/
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple



The Gathering

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Greeting

We meet in the presence of God
who knows our needs,
hears our cries,
feels our pain,
and heals our wounds.

Song: Praise to the holiest in the height

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIBgTmiJCPI>

Prayers of Penitence

By the mercies of God,
let us confess our sins and present our bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to him,
which is our spiritual worship.

Lord Jesus, illuminate the darkness in our hearts:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, open our eyes to your saving love:
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, unstop our ears to hear your living word:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour
forgive *us our* sins
and make *us* holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Collect

Lord Jesus Christ,
light of the nations and glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy
to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God.
Amen.

The Liturgy of the Word

Malachi 3:1-5

'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵ 'So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,' says the LORD Almighty.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 24

- ¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
² for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.
³ Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?
⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.
⁵ They will receive blessing from the LORD
and vindication from God their Saviour.
⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.
⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty,
the LORD mighty in battle.
⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates;

lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory?

The LORD Almighty –
he is the King of glory.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Hebrews 2:14-end

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Song: Purify my heart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lvXA0yRDwY>

Gospel Reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke. Glory to you, O Lord.

Luke 2:22-40

²² 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’), 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’.

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 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 marvelled 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.^[e] She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

The sharp eyed amongst you will have noticed the readings used today are different from those listed for the 4th Sunday of Epiphany. Instead, we have the readings for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which will be observed by many on the 2nd February. This goes by the alternative name of Candlemas, a festival with its roots in antiquity but which was only recently added to the language used by the Anglican church. In the northern hemisphere this celebration sits roughly half-way through winter (or at least it did in pre-global warming times!). In some countries it is the point at which Christmas decorations and so forth are put away, and the French celebrate it with crepes!!

In days before gas lights and electricity, candles obviously played a far greater significance in life than they do now, so it would be at this festival that the candles used in church for the following year would be blessed. Consequently, it became a festival for candles, hence Candlemas.

There is even weather-lore associated with Candlemas:

If Christmas Day be fair and bright
Winter will have another fight.
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,
Winter won't come again.

You heard it here.....

Anyway, we will concentrate on The Presentation rather than anything to do with candles!

The Presentation essentially combines two acts associated with the Torah. Firstly, Torah taught that, for a period of 40 days after the birth of a boy, (or 60 in the case of a girl) women were considered ritually unclean and at the end of that period they came to the Temple or Synagogue to be purified. Secondly it was decreed that every firstborn male was "holy to the Lord" and so Jewish parents would make an offering of five shekels to redeem their first-born son.

There is no mention of a redemption offering being made, one could hardly redeem from God an infant who was God, but as with Jesus' baptism being done in order to identify with humanity, I suspect the custom was followed superfluous as it was. Uniquely, the child presented in the Temple has come from God, to save the world from the punishment that the same law that required his presentation demanded.

Whilst the central characters of Luke's infancy narrative are young, the story is framed around an interaction between these young people and two pairs of elderly people who lives are characterised by faithful and patient service.

The first pair, Zechariah and Elizabeth, have spent years playing their role in the worshipping community and waiting for a child. They learn they are to become the parents of John. This family would have a key role in the unfolding story, both in terms of Mary's experience and subsequently in the public ministry of Jesus.

But Luke concludes his infancy narrative with the second pair, Simeon and Anna. Both have led lives which exemplify faithful, patient, service.

Patience is something I have to work on! A while ago I purchased a home-brew wine kit which promised vineyard quality wine in 21 days! I have memories of mum and dad making wine and bottles lying around for years, and I wanted this plonk quicker than that. I followed the instructions and, three weeks later settled down to enjoy the nectar the manufacturers had promised. It wasn't fit for chips! Maybe you cannot rush decent wine.....

Anyway, both Anna and Simeon have spent years in the service of their Lord. Simeon is carrying a promise that he would live to see the Christ. After years of worship and contemplation Simeon acts on the prompting of the Spirit to attend the Temple at the appropriate time for that promise to be realised and, in the process, gives us one of the great hymns of the church, the Nunc Dimittis or Song of Simeon. He gives thanks, he celebrates, he speaks of Jesus' role both to Jew and Gentile. But he does more.

Yes, Simeon speaks of Christ's glory as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles", but he reminds his hearers that this glory is accompanied by judgement. Jesus will be the cause of people's "rising and falling", and, through him, "the inner thoughts of many will be revealed".

In each generation, the Church has to discern how to proclaim afresh the good news of God's unconditional love without evading the realities of sin, repentance, and judgement and it is not easy....

And, of course, Simeon warns Mary of the pain that she is to experience in the future.

Then in steps Anna. Whether she was 84 or whether she had been a widow for 84 years depends on how one reads the Greek but, nevertheless, she was clearly not in the first flush of youth. She had dedicated her life to the Temple; worshipping, fasting and praying. And having given thanks to God she did the same thing as the shepherds had done following their encounter with Jesus – she told people about him. We are told she spoke to 'all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem'. I guess that was a fair number.....

We touched on the dynamic between worship and action last week and I make no apologies for returning to it. In today's gospel we have two people who have spent their lives in worship and contemplation. Suddenly, at the prompting of the Spirit, in just the right moment all that comes to fruition in action.

Now you might say they were fortunate, they were in a position to spend their time worshipping and contemplating and reflecting and were supported to do just that. It's different for me. I am too busy. The pressures of modern life are too much. The world moves on. It's ok if I watch Songs of Praise or listen to a Spring Harvest c.d. every now and again and say a prayer when I'm in crisis. The rest is what we have clergy for.....You might, but I am sure you wouldn't!

I would suggest that you have to make time for worship and contemplation. It does not have to be hours, but it does have to be intentional. It is something we need to prioritise and, maybe, that is something we can do together during Lent. It is said that 'All work and no play made Jack a dull boy'; well we know enough about mental health to know it makes Jack, or Jill, sick as well! Yes, we live busy, sometimes stress-filled, lives. There are constant demands for our attention and our time.

The time we spend in worship or in contemplation is never wasted time, as some would suggest; without that foundation our activity will be shallow, misdirected and exhausting. The last year has been incredibly difficult and very different from anything we have experienced. Many people have been forced to stop. What have we filled our time with? Judging by the news feeds we have spent it doing a combination of over-eating, watching Netflix, feeling anxious, exercising with Joe Wicks, shouting at the government and getting even more cross on social media than we did before. To a degree many have been given that gift of time that we were so insistent we did not have. Have we spent that gift wisely?

I remember reading that it takes about 40 days for an action to become a habit. Maybe that's why Lent is 40 days!! It takes time and effort and commitment to introduce routines into our lives but, as I said last week, a routine of worship, prayer, Bible reading and study has, over the life of the church, proved its value. The religious communities base their whole existence around it, weaving work and food and leisure in between. Is it part of yours, or is it something you leave to others? Or do you think, as someone a while ago told me, that that is what we pay clergy to do?

I frequently ask you questions and rarely get any feedback. I know, from talking to other clergy, that I am not alone in that and maybe at some point I will be inundated with replies. But if I ask you 'What is your vision for St. James?', and you do not answer, I will assume you do not have one or are content with the vision rattling around my head!!

And if I ask 'How can we resource you in your journey with God?', and I get no reply, I will assume you have everything you need.

And if I ask 'Is there anything we can do to help you or someone you know?' and I get no reply, I will assume everyone is fine.

As I said last week, questions like these are not rhetorical and reflection is great, but at some point, we might be called to action, and that action has to be timely.

At a previous church I did some work with others around the vision of the church; we had services and a lot of group work focused upon that. Eight months or so later someone came to me and said, 'I've been thinking about it and I don't think we should be building a link', (they did not even preface it with something like 'following on from that vision conversation'). Time had moved on, decisions had been made, and their input had rather missed the boat! Both Simeon and Anna had spent their time contemplating but, when the time was right, they acted. Do not be like my Brummie friend and miss the boat!!

Shalom,

Ian

Affirmation of Faith

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;**

**he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

We pray that Christ may be seen in the life of the Church.

You have called us into the family
of those who are the children of God.
May our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ
be strengthened by your grace.
Jesus, Lord of the Church,
in your mercy hear us.

You have called us to be a temple
where the Holy Spirit can dwell.
Give us clean hands and pure hearts
so that our lives will reflect your holiness.
Jesus, Lord of the Church,
in your mercy hear us.

You have called us to be a light to the world,
so that those in darkness come to you.
May our lives shine as a witness
to the saving grace you have given for all.
Jesus, Lord of the Church,
in your mercy hear us.

You have called us to be members of your body,
so that when one suffers, all suffer together.
We ask for your comfort and healing power
to bring hope to those in distress.
Jesus, Lord of the Church,
in your mercy hear us.

You have called us to be the Bride,
where you, Lord, are the Bridegroom.
Prepare us for the wedding feast,
where we will be united with you for ever.
Jesus, Lord of the Church,
in your mercy hear us.

Jesus, Lord of the Church,
you have called us into fellowship with all your saints.
We unite our prayers with theirs
and ask for grace to serve you with joy
where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for all eternity.
Amen.

The Peace

Christ is our peace.
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.
The old has passed away: behold, everything has become new.

May the peace of the Lord be always with us and all those we love.

Song: Restore, O Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1g4p3v06lhk>

An act of Spiritual Communion

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

Lord, in these days of mercy,
make us quiet and prayerful;
in these days of challenge,
make us stronger in you;
in these days of emptiness,
take possession of us;
in these days of waiting,
open our hearts to the mystery of your cross.

Song: Send me Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA19ZGyCjSk>

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water
welling up to eternal life,
perfect in you the image of his glory;
and the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.

The Dismissal

To God the Father, who loved us,
and made us accepted in the Beloved:
to God the Son, who loved us,
and loosed us from our sins by his own blood:
to God the Holy Spirit,
who spreads the love of God abroad in our hearts:
to the one true God be all love and all glory
for time and for eternity.

Amen.