



A sermon preached at
St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Darren McFarland

Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Today's feast is a bundle of contrasts and opposites. It's 41 days since Christmas and we will now dismantle the crib – the joy of celebrating Christ's birth has that touch of bitterness as with the prophecy of Simeon we are turned towards Lent and the Passion.

Candlemas holds before us the stark contrast of a language of salvation and glory that is also a language of rejection and pain and Luke, the gospel writer gives us a multi-layered text. He needs to get the holy family from Bethlehem to Jerusalem – Matthew had done that with the slaughter of the Innocents and the flight into Egypt and the return later. Luke gets the family back by introducing the motifs of purification and presentation – and in the process appears to be confused about two different religious customs. The first is that of the purification of the mother at the Temple after the birth of a child at which she offers two young pigeons or doves. The second is that of the presentation of the first male child to the Lord and paying the sanctuary a sum of five shekels to get him back. But Luke isn't primarily concerned with a factual account.

The two most important theological elements which provide a balance and contrast are the utterances of Simeon – the *Nunc Dimittis* and the brief words to Mary about a sword piercing her heart.

The *Nunc Dimittis* is almost a pastiche of passages from Isaiah about salvation and Israel's glory and the light to the Gentiles. Salvation is for ALL –Matthew introduced the Gentiles via the Magi – Luke does it through these words of Simeon – we have glorious picture of the universality of God's love – BUT – and there's always a BUT – there's another side to it all as Simeon says to Mary “this child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed.... And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

The really curious line is about the sword piercing Mary's heart. Pious devotion has seen the sword piercing Mary's heart as she stood at the foot of the cross and saw her son die – the problem with that interpretation is that the picture of Mary at the foot of the cross is from John's gospel, which had not been written at the time of Luke. So that pious tradition isn't an entirely satisfactory explanation of Simeon's words.

The most challenging statement to Mary in Luke's gospel is where Jesus talks about his true family being those who do the will of God – he doesn't come to bring peace, but will set son against father, mother against daughter. The demand of the gospel is placed upon everyone – Mary included – but in Luke's view Mary has emerged successfully, not because she's Jesus' mother – but because she did the will of God. Mary has no special status because she is Jesus' mother – her greatness comes because she believed the word of the Lord and obeyed his will. And that remains the challenge for all of us – rich, poor, high or low – matters not a jot in the kingdom of God – it's doing the will of God that matters. And it's not always easy discerning what that is. The sword that Jesus brought of which I just spoke wasn't a literal one – but one that cuts to the heart and challenges our deepest assumptions and attitudes.

There are many angles to this Candlemas story –
a light proclaimed to all people,
a glorious vision of God yearning for all people to be his,
yet the walking of that way can mean the heart being pierced.

There is also, I would like to suggest as meeting of old and young – Simeon, mature and wise, takes a 40 day old baby in his arms, and blesses the child because he is the hope – not just for the future, but for the here and now as well. And the faithful and joy-filled Anna begins to tell everyone about the child. As church families we need constantly to be reminded that children are not the church of tomorrow but they are an important element of the church of today. They need to be welcomed and nurtured and taught and formed in the faith so that they can confidently articulate that faith and take their place in the leadership of the church.

I want to share with you, by way of challenge and reminder, a few paragraphs from a blog written by a young mum, in which a sympathetic parishioner reflects on what he sees:

“You are doing something really, really important. I know it's not easy. I see you with your arms overflowing, and I know you came to church already tired. Parenting is tiring. Really tiring. I know you're wondering, is this worth it? Why do I bother? I know you often leave church more exhausted than fulfilled. But what you are doing is so important.

When you are here, the church is filled with a joyful noise. When you are here, the Body of Christ is more fully present. When you are here, we are reminded that this worship thing we do isn't about bible study or personal, quiet contemplation but coming together to worship as a community where all are welcome, where we share in the Word and Sacrament together. When you are here, I have hope that these pews won't be empty in 10 years when your kids are old enough to sit quietly and behave in worship. I know that they are learning how and why we worship now, before it's too late. They are learning that worship is important.”

Shortly, as part of our regular worship, we will receive the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation – a sharing in the passion and the resurrection of Christ – a privilege and a joy, yes, but also a call. A call to go out and bear the goodness of salvation which is for the whole of creation and to be lights that shine to the glory of the one and only living God.