

ADDRESS	27 December 2020	First Sunday after Christmas
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Isaiah 61.10 – 62.3	Good news to the oppressed	<i>Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and to understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.</i>
Psalms 148	Praise the Lord	
Luke 2.22-40	The presentation of Christ	

It's only two days after Christmas, our children and grandchildren haven't even had time to break all their presents, yet our Gospel reading takes us ahead 40 days, to the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple.

This was one of the most significant events in Jesus' life; its commemoration has been one of the great festivals of the church since at least the 4th century, and a great many artists have pictured the scene as they imagine it. The Gospel story tells us that the ceremony was important to those who were in the Temple that day, and it can have great significance for us, if we take the story into our hearts.

This is how one modern artist pictures the scene: **Slide 1 on**



The presentation was a great event for the holy family itself. They appear tentative as they approach the priest at the temple door. A poor peasant couple from rural Galilee; they had travelled 130 km to the big city for the ceremony. It's a long walk, carrying a month-old baby. Their second long walk in 40 days. The Bible says nothing about Mary riding on a donkey, no matter what some artists put on our Christmas cards. Like most peasant families, this couple probably could not afford to buy and keep their own donkey.

In spite of their poverty and the distance, the couple were determined to fulfil the requirements of Jewish law, as set out in the book of Leviticus. They could not afford a sheep to sacrifice to the Lord as they presented Him with their first-born son, so they settled for a pair of turtle doves or two small pigeons, as the law allowed poor families to do.

They did not know it, but what this family did had already been done. The sacrifice was redundant. Mary and Joseph did not need to present their son to the Father, for he had been with God from the beginning. Nor did Mary need to be purified after Jesus's birth, for "his birth ushers in the purification of the world", as one writer puts it.

We want the best for our children, we dedicate them to God in baptism, but we may be disappointed later. I have four surviving children but only one is a believer. He is an Anglican priest, so my other children say cheekily, 'he can pray for us', and he does. But he cannot win salvation for them and neither can I.

We can teach our children the faith and pray for them; then we have to leave them to God. They may grow out of having us care for them, but they can never grow out of having us care about them, and to pray for them. **Slide 1 off - Slide 2 on**



The Presentation of
the Christ Child in the
Temple, Phillippe de
Champaigne (1648)

The second image is nearly 400 years old, and now hangs in a museum in Brussels.

The Gospel does not tell us, but Mary and Joseph would not have been alone for the ceremony. This was a public event, in a busy temple. Men and women crowd around, gawking. Jesus was not only being presented to the Lord, he was being recognised as a Jew, as a member of the community of faith, one of the people chosen to be a blessing to all peoples.

The temple complex covered an area as large as ten football fields, and was always crowded. Services of animal sacrifice and prayer were performed at least twice a day, in the morning and the late afternoon, with extra ceremonies every Sabbath and on festival days.

The presentation of Jesus would have taken place in the Court of the Women, which was crowded, noisy and smelly. It was always alive with worshippers and with pilgrims who came to offer their sacrifices of cows, sheep, goats, and birds, or, if they had no animals, the first fruit of their crops. It smelled with the blood of slaughtered animals; it was filled with the sounds of their death-cries, mingling with the prayers of priests and the common people and with the psalms sung by the Levites and their acolytes.

Our churches are very different, they are generally used only two or three times a week, and they've been especially quiet for months, but they are still places where faith is nurtured and where children can be brought to be presented to God in baptism, and later to learn about saving grace, and invited to accept it for themselves.

When most of us were young, this was the norm in what was then a Christian society. Today most of our children are lost to other gods, to sport and to other amusements; we live in a multi-faith society, where the Christian faith is under attack from various woke groups, and our children and grandchildren and our neighbours are in a sense, a lost generation, lost to the church at least, and

largely unaware that they are for ever surrounded by the love of God. We need to keep praying for them and work to make sure that our church is a loving community which attracts people to God. **Slide 2 off -Slide 3 on**



Our third image shows Anna and Simeon meeting Jesus for the first time.

Do you remember when you showed your first child to the grandparents or the maiden aunts for the first time? They almost snatched the baby from your arms and goo-gooed over it, and passed it from one to another and admired it, while you stood by, smugly proud of what you had made.

This is how this artist has pictured Anna and Simeon – they were devout Jews who had spent their lifetimes in prayer, awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Suddenly the Messiah was with them in the temple; they had expected a great warrior, not a baby, but they both immediately recognised him for what he was, the Saviour of their people, and of all peoples.

So they praised God, and praised him to other people; the gospel tells us that Anna, in particular, spoke about Jesus to ‘all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’, that is, the final end of the people’s slavery to foreign powers, the final ransom for their sins – redemption is a major part of what Jesus does for us, releasing us from bondage to sin and to death.

Simeon and Anna met Jesus for the first time in the house of God, among the crowd of worshippers. And that’s where many of us have met him for the first time, through the ministry of Word and Sacrament, through reading the Bible or hearing it read or hearing it expounded, as we are doing now, or sharing in the memorial of his sacrificial death, which we call the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist, the thanksgiving.

For in his death, Jesus was again presented to the Father – his parents offered two small birds as their sacrifice, Jesus offered himself, as we are also called to do. Others meet him for the first time in the pages of the Bible, that’s why it’s so important for us to support the work of Bible societies throughout the world, to help give others the same opportunities we have been given.

For us, every act of worship, every prayer, every Bible study, is an opportunity to meet Jesus again for the first time, to be challenged by his purity, to wonder at his self-sacrifice and to marvel at the outcome of just three years of itinerant ministry. He often slept rough, with a few committed followers, women as well as men, and died a painful and ignominious death.

The Resurrection made all the difference. We can meet the risen Jesus again each time we read the Scriptures with an open heart – we can read of Jesus foretold, we can read what Jesus did and what he taught, and what the leaders of the early church said about him, as they thought and prayed about his life and death and resurrection and came to realise who Jesus truly was.

The journey took several centuries, until it was summarised in the historic creeds of the church. The so-called Apostles Creed, which we shall say together shortly, is known from the 4th century; and the mature understanding of God as Trinity, taken for granted in the Scriptures, was at last expounded in the so-called Athanasian creed in the 6th century.

So, as we worship today, we have the benefit of centuries of growing understanding of the being of God, and the mission of Jesus and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

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We can see Jesus today in the faces of people in need, people we can love and help. Children of God in rags. This is the challenge for us. Revelation did not end when the last book of the Bible was written, neither did the divine commandment to love others as much as we love ourselves.

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2020 has been a bad year, a tough year. We'll be glad to welcome in the new year in a few days. We can make 2021 a really happy new year if we learn to meet Jesus again and again for the first time, leading us to praise God and to share the good news with others, as Simeon and Anna did.

*Lord **God**, we praise you that, through your beloved son, you can satisfy our every need. We thank you for the promise that if we delight in him, he will fulfil the desires of our hearts. Help us this coming year to come to know you better through your Son, and to love you more deeply, and to share this love with others, so that, with one voice, we may praise your mighty name. **AMEN***

Images for 27 December 2020



For *Connections*

SERMON NOTES

Today's Gospel reading jumps to the Presentation of Jesus in the temple, 40 days after Christmas -- Luke 2.22-40. The address will consider

What the ceremony meant to the family

What it meant to those who looked on

What it meant to the devout Simeon and Anna

The challenge for us