

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple...

... Be still and know that I am God

A sermon given on the the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, 31st January 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.

Luke 2:22-40

I wonder how people recognise the Lord Jesus? We talk, don't we, about 'Putting our faith in Jesus'; we talk about 'Following Jesus'; we're told that Jesus is the 'Saviour of the world'. So quite a lot hangs upon our ability to recognise Jesus and to know that it's really him. So how do people do that? How do you do that?

I begin with that question because it connects us in an immediate way with our gospel reading that we've just heard. When I hear Simeon's song, that lovely song we know as the Nunc Dimittis (which Anglican choirs the world over repeat every time they sing evensong) and I hear Simeon hailing the Baby Jesus as 'The salvation of God' and 'The light to lighten the Gentiles', I can't help asking myself, how did he know?

All Simeon has seen is a very ordinary looking couple coming into the temple in Jerusalem with their newborn baby. There are no choirs of angels, no visions, no miracles. At best, there has only been some past revelation, probably given many years before, reassuring Simeon that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. And we're told that he came into the temple that day having been guided by the spirit, but we're not told directly how he recognised Jesus; yet somehow, he did.

It's a question for all of us: if you have some sort of a faith, if you feel that at some point you have recognised the presence and activity of Jesus in your life, how has that shown itself? And if perhaps you don't feel comfortable going that far, if you're not quite sure you ever have recognised Jesus, but you're nonetheless here taking part in this service or watching from home and feeling that actually, although it's never happened, you would love to be able to recognise Jesus and that the idea of recognising Jesus seems profoundly attractive to you and that it stirs up some deep longing in your heart.

How do you think it might happen? What kind of experience goes on for people who think they have recognised Jesus?

When the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was once asked, "How should philosophers greet each other?", he said, "Take your time."

And there's something there about how those who spend their lives seeking truth must be patient and attentive and open to the world beyond their own ego and understanding and control. Another 20th century philosopher, Simone Weil, said that, 'We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them, but by waiting for them.'

This way of looking is in the first place, attentive - the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Simeon had been attentively waiting all his life, so had Anna with her daily participation in the round of worship in the temple. Both of them had trained themselves to look for God; to be ready for God; to recognise God.

Part of that discipline involves studying the scriptures, feeding on them, expecting to meet God in its pages. Part of it was developing the discipline of corporate worship, of learning to praise God together: praise acknowledges the truth of God's goodness, and praise lifts us out of ourselves, directing our attention towards God and in the process ,helps us to become more truly ourselves. Praising God together may be difficult in these days of pandemic; but on the other hand, at home perhaps there's a freedom without having to worry about what our neighbours think.

So those who would recognise Jesus, as Simeon and Anna did, need to think about their daily habits and disciplines of looking for Christ in the Scriptures and praising God through Christ in our prayer and worship. If our waiting is directed away from ourselves, it doesn't need to make us frustrated or impatient: waiting for someone we know will come can make us self-forgetful; the anticipation can be full of peace and hope. Contemplative waiting is a quiet, still, opening-up of the heart and mind to what is before us, whether it's the word of God, a person or even a plant.

Contemplation is how we make ourselves present to something other than ourselves resisting the temptation to seize it, own it or use it. Contemplation prepares us to recognise the truth when it comes to us. Iris Murdoch describes looking out of a window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, brooding on some slight she had suffered, when suddenly she saw a hovering Kestrel: 'In a moment,' she writes, 'everything is altered; the brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared; there is nothing now but Kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter, it seems less important.'

And of course, this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care. I don't think Iris Murdoch would have

called herself a Christian, but in that passage, she shares with Simeon and Anna a sense of contemplative openness to a bigger truth that is waiting to be given.

So I wonder, have you been able to recognise the light of Christ this week? A lot of writing on prayer stresses that it's just a matter of being prepared like Simeon and Anna. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton wrote, 'The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves, in prayer, a chance to realise that we have what we seek; we don't have to rush after it; it was there all the time; and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.'

We may not be aware how far we in today's world are in love with novelty; how we distract ourselves with new experiences; new possessions; new fads; surfing the web; informed by rolling news; keeping up with the latest, whatever it is. In such a culture, patience is driven out by frustration and waiting comes as naturally as speaking Mandarin. And as a result, we fail to recognise the Lord when he comes to save - we remain in darkness even when presented with the light of the world.

Simeon and Anna had trained themselves to be patient and to wait attentively, and as a result, Simeon was able to say, "My eyes have seen your salvation." - you recognise Jesus as the light revealed to all the world.

So let us pray for healing for our eyes; pray for hearts that can pay attention and can see the presence of the Lord; cultivate habits of stillness and openness so you can recognise the Lord Jesus. Marcel Proust once said, 'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes' or, as the Psalmist put it, simply:

'Be still and know that I am God.'

Reading Text

Luke 2:22-40

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.