

Presentation of Christ

... a light for the whole world

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, 30th January 20212 by the Associate Vicar the Revd Wendy Wale in Beverley Minster

Luke 2:22-40

One of the things that disappeared with within the various lockdowns of last year was my 50th birthday, and I like to think that because we weren't able to celebrate it, it means it didn't happen and I can still say I'm in my forties, but apparently it doesn't work like that and I am, according to many, officially old, whatever that means. One of my favourite gifts on my 50th birthday was a photo book which was lovingly compiled by my wonderful husband, who asked friends and family through the wonderful medium of social media to send memories of me, moments from the past 50 years, and he pieced them all together in these 50 glorious years of Wendy

[Wendy holds up the photo book] you are far too far away to see them - but I was really cute once. And I had blonde hair. Well, there it is look if you can see blonde curly hair - where did that go eh? Anyway, I could stay here all morning.

But it made me appreciate as I looked through those memories, just how fortunate I've been with a loving family, wonderful friends, opportunities to travel and an amazing career, both as a teacher and as a priest. And the images remind me that so many of my personal hopes have been fulfilled and that much of what I wish for now is for other people. I've recently been hoping and actually, since I've written this, my hopes have come true that my niece didn't break her legs whilst learning to ski. She discovered quite early in her trip that all her friends were kind of red run, black run people and she had never, ever stood on a slope before - she was down red runs within minutes. Then another family member, Sam, who has COVID, can get better before his first big swimming competition. I'm sure like many of you, I pray and hold hope for the situation between Russia and Ukraine and that the financial difficulties here at the Minster somehow be resolved because there are constant images popping into my head and I have to choose what to do with them. Some make me smile, others I pray for. Quite often I'll send a message as I think of someone and try and find out more.

We are today at the end of the season of Epiphany, where we have been seeing snapshots of Jesus early life through our readings and talks: we followed his birth and his baptism; we've enjoyed his first miracle and heard him debating in the temple; we've journeyed with the Magi and walked with Mary and Joseph. Each image has helped us see something bigger about Jesus's life and Ministry.

Epiphany means a revelation, something that helps us see things differently, a new or bigger picture. And the stories we've heard have all pointed towards Jesus's future ministry and that beyond - the ministry of bringing God's love, the message of his Kingdom to the whole world.

And it's in this, our final Epiphany reading, that we meet Simeon and Anna, who have celebrated even more birthdays than I have. They spend their time in the temple, their personal longing not yet fulfilled. They are praying for an epiphany for their people, for the whole world. They wait for God's promised Messiah. And in the glorious snapshot that we heard read earlier, (and I'm sure some of you can just imagine it as an Instagram post hashtag, look who I met today) Mary and Joseph enter the temple to dedicate their baby to God, as was required for every first born male. And as Mary and Joseph present Jesus, Simeon now a very old man, takes him in his arms, and he instantly knows that he is in the presence of the one who was promised, the one he knew he would see before he died, the Lord's Messiah. And Simeon declares, "Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people, Israel."

In this tiny baby wrapped up in a bundle of cloth, he knows, in the way we all know sometimes, that he is holding history in his arms, light for the Gentiles, glory for the Israelites, his hopes for the whole world wrapped up in the presence of a newborn child. Anna likewise, an 84 year old widow, praises God for the redemption of Jerusalem that she sees in front of her.

And I wonder when you last had a moment, perhaps something incredibly everyday and ordinary, but when you just knew the glory of God was present and everything had changed. It might also have been the birth of a longed for baby or a meeting of a new friend. But it might also have been a phone call that simply offered hope

where there had previously been none, or a moment of laughter when there had previously only been tears.

Simeon is clear as he speaks to Mary. Her baby is not going to be a King like King Herod, nor a Messiah blaze in power and triumph. This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.

God's Messiah came to deal with the problem of pain and darkness in the world by sharing in the pain and shining light into the darkest of places. Each of us, in the snapshots of our lives, will have known moments of agony, of betrayal, of loss and grief and heartbreak. You might be experiencing that right now. I attended a memorial just this last week of a friend exactly the same age as me on her 51st birthday last as would have been - whose death has shattered the lives of so many of us, her friends and her family. I'm attending another one next week, for a young man just 23 years old, he was overwhelmed by the darkness and pain.

The baby in Simeon's arms doesn't offer quick fix solutions. He himself experienced all the human emotions, both joyful and agonising, mental and physical. His mother indeed knew what it was to have a sword pierce her very soul. Just as my friend, the mother of the young man whose life ended far too soon, is feeling at this time.

We will begin together to walk the journey towards Jesus's betrayal and death in just a few weeks time. But we already know that darkness is not the end of the story. This is a story of glory and light, of life and hope beyond death and pain, of dancing and feasting, of rejoicing and peace.

The very best collections of photos use black and white as well as every shade of colour. The photos capture moments from the very start to the moments at the end, whatever someone's age. And my hope is that whoever you are sitting here or at home today listening to this, you will find yourself in the story, from the very youngest child to Gertie, (who at 105, is definitely the oldest member of the Minster congregation and the youngest person I actually know!)...

... my hope is that you will experience afresh the light of revelation; the comfort of knowing that God goes before and with you, whatever your situation: if you sit in darkness today, may shafts of light pierce through; if you dance in glorious technicolour, may your joy be infectious and transform others; if life simply feels duff,

may there be new moments to add to your snapshots; and finally, whoever and whatever situations you hold in your heart, may you see God's hand at work - the light has shone in the dark and the darkness will not overcome it.

Reading Texts

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.