

The Church, despite all, ...

... is not only important, but essential

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, 22nd January 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 2:22-40

The film star, John Wayne, who used to star in all of those Westerns, once said, "I don't much like God when he gets under a roof." You can imagine him saying it, can't you? And I imagine he speaks for generations. Finding God in nature, great; but finding God in church, well, who does that? And I've lost track of the number of times people have said to me, "I'm not into organised religion, but I am spiritual." And it's almost calling someone spiritual is a compliment, whereas calling someone religious - well, it's not exactly an insult, but there's a slight sense of, 'Well, this is a bit odd'. And in the same way people have often professed admiration for Jesus whilst being very wary of the Church. It was the philosopher Nietzsche who said, "I would accept Christ did he not come with his leprous bride?" - there's a compliment for the Church!! And probably everybody here this morning has their own doubts, reservations, question marks about the Church: whether it's our history which so often has been compromised; whether it's the stance the national church takes on particular issues; maybe there's things going on locally, just this sense that the church at times can get confused with being a heritage organisation; or it's just so slow to see anything happen; or it's so cold sitting in the building. We have all of us got our doubts about the church, and if you think you have issues, I certainly have mine.

But on this feast of Candlemass, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, one of the things that is very striking is that Jesus doesn't shy away from organised religion, but engages with it fully. In this morning's passage, I lost track of the number of times Luke emphasises that everything was done according to the law of the Lord. And the first thing that Mary and Joseph do with the baby Jesus is they take him to Church. They take him to the temple. In fact, I think it's the only time in the Gospels where we're told that Jesus took part in a service in the Jerusalem Temple. And Mary and Joseph offer sacrifices. And it's in the temple that the old man, Simeon identifies Jesus as the Messiah and the prophetess Anna who worshipped in the temple day and night, praises God and speaks about Jesus to all those who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. And so there is this sense that at the beginning of his life, Jesus is identified fully with the organised religion of the day.

So how might that play out in our own time? Why does Jesus not do away with priests and temples and synagogues and tell everybody to find God in their own way? Steve Jobs, the

co-founder of Apple, once said in a lecture, "Don't be trapped by dogma, which is living with the results of other people's thinking; don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your own heart and intuition". It's funny, it had never struck me before that Steve Jobs sounds exactly like a Disney princess, "Just follow your heart."

And that's the problem. In what kind of reality does no one need to learn anything from anyone else? No need to learn how to speak because we just make up language for ourselves? No need to learn how to do arithmetic because we just make up our own maths. No need to listen to anyone else or pay attention to anyone else or trust anyone else or learn from anyone else because there is nothing outside our own self-generated bubble worth learning. We're all perfectly capable of inventing the wheel for ourselves. That's the message of our day, isn't it? And of course, it's complete nonsense. This whole modern project of telling people you can construct your own identity, work out your own value system, make up your own opinions and shape your own future is nonsense, when you think about it. The most independent, creative, innovative person is still standing on the shoulders of giants, is still utterly dependent on the thinking of other people to provide them with their starting point.

And if that's true, the most basic everyday skills we all take for granted, how much more true is it of trying to understand God? For nearly 3,000 years, some of the greatest minds in human history have reflected on God; have sought him; listened to him; formed ideas about him; and tried to live in response to God. And the place where we tap into that experience, that memory, that learning, is through the Church. It's through organised religion: that's where the story is handed on; that's where the fire is kept stoked and alive; that's where you can find other people who can tell you about their own experience of Jesus. Without organised religion, within a generation we would be literally back in the Stone Age, with no better concept of God than offering human sacrifices. It would be as if over the last few millennia, we had learned nothing at all.

And to pull it back to the gospel reading, Simeon hasn't been waiting all his life for a private spiritual experience or to practise mindfulness techniques. Simeon has been waiting for God's salvation for all peoples, for a light for a revelation to the Gentiles. He's longing for God to do something public and lasting and universal something that will change the world and not just bestow a bit of private religious experience for a few individuals. And that kind of message, a transformative gospel of love and reconciliation and justice, can't be lived-out without a community; it can't be lived-out without buildings in which a community can meet; it can't be lived out without leaders to plan and organise things and bring people together.

God knows, the Church has its problems and don't we know it. Not the least of which is that it can be too inward-looking. But don't let anyone tell you that the world can manage without organised religion or that there's anything inherently bad about it. Without the Church, within a generation the name of Jesus would be no more than a swear word.

And I think that that name and that all it represents is far too precious for God to allow that to happen.

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 turtle-doves 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 for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped 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 favour of God was upon him.