

Christ the Light of the World ...

... we walk in His Light

A sermon given on Candlemas, 28th January 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster

Malachi 3:1-5; Luke 2:22-40

I'm not sure how many of you have seen the film 'Children of Men' released about 20 years ago. It takes place in a dystopian near future in which the entire population are unable to have children and have been for the past 18 years or so. And this, with a combination of environmental and economic factors, has led to near global societal collapse. England, as the fascistic police state (in the film, that is) is one of the few countries to retain some sense of law and order. And the wealthy elite in England have their own personal mercenary armies which they send all over Europe to collect works of art and import them back to the UK. And there is a scene in which the protagonist enters into a government official's house and there in the hallway is Michelangelo's statue of David. But it just looks wrong somehow. Upon seeing the statue, you don't get a sense of its beauty - it seems entirely meaningless and hollow. But why is this? It's the same statue as it has been for hundreds of years. It's no less beautiful or unique in itself, but removed from its world, severed from its roots, the statue ceases to appear as a great work of art and instead appears as a kind of commodity or oversized prop. The disconnect between the work of art and the environment it inhabits is too great.

And in the time of the prophet Malachi, from whom our first reading today came, Israel viewed the temple in the same way. Israel's original temple had survived for about 500 years before it was destroyed and God's people were exiled into Babylon. About 50 years after this original exile, Israel was allowed to return. And with this return to the promised land, the reconfirmation of their covenant with God and the construction of a new temple, Israel expected the coming of the Messiah and a messianic age of economic prosperity and political domination of their neighbours.

But this narrative was being shattered by the reality around them: the Messiah had not arrived; the people were still subject to foreign colonial rule; there were regular crop failures; sacrifice and prayers in the temple were becoming a burden and without any obvious worldly or spiritual effect. The temple was supposed to be the place where God's presence resided in a unique and powerful way. It was through the sacrifice of the High Priest that Israel received their forgiveness for their sins; where purifying and cleansing rituals took place - access to God was nearly wholly

mediated through the temple. The temple was a sign of God's covenant, of his promised Messiah, of the unique relationship between God and his chosen people. All these promises, all these signs, bore no relation to the reality Israel was seeing around them. The disconnect between the promises of the temple and the reality outside the temple were too great. And so the temple began to take on the same role as Michelangelo's David in 'Children of Men.'

Israel's reality was so far removed from the promise of the messianic age that the temple itself felt meaningless. And because of this, the priests and the people became disillusioned and apathetic. They continued to perform rituals and offer sacrifices in the vague hope of a messianic age, but doubts had begun to creep in as to whether the temple was really doing what it was supposed to do. Was their covenant with God really reconfirmed? Were their sins really forgiven? Were they really reconciled to God through the sacrifices in the temple?

But then, eventually (as we all know) the Messiah did arrive: the shattering of expectations arrived as a tiny baby, a tiny baby carried into the temple by his mother - this was the unexpected Messiah.

And an old man, Simeon, was waiting and watching in the same temple that had become the focal point of disillusionment and disappointment in Malachi's time and beyond. And as Simeon took the baby in his arms, recognising his greatness, he looked down at him and said this prayer, *"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles."* Here in this tiny baby, Simeon sees everything that the temple is supposed to be: all peoples and nations are called into God's covenant; all encounter the true presence of God; and all are given full assurance of the forgiveness of their sins through this baby. Jesus, as the true temple, doesn't fulfil the expectations Israel had for their Messiah; he doesn't wield political or military power; but more importantly, as the true temple, he reconciles the whole of creation to God through his sacrifice.

And as the church, as Christ's body, we who follow Christ become part of that true temple as well.

And we enter into this temple in our baptism: when we are baptised, we are given all these promises of the temple; true assurance of our relationship with God; the presence of God through the Holy Spirit; and assurance of the forgiveness of our sins.

Today we celebrate Christ, the Light of the World, who entered into the darkness of our earthly existence and in baptism, as the liturgy tells us, we receive the Light of Christ and we walk in the Light of Christ all the days of our lives. To walk in Christ's Light means to live as the visible sign of the transforming nature of Christ's light; to live out his love, mercy and forgiveness on all whom we encounter.

Reading Texts

Malachi 3:1-5

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵ Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

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.