

Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas)

Address

The counting out of days and the meaningful customs and practices associated with them is something that we are missing at the moment. It's Sunday (well actually it's Saturday but probably you are watching on Sunday or maybe not), it's Sunday and we are not in church. We are sitting at home perhaps in our pjs, not our Sunday best. We are not taking part in our usual Eucharistic worship.

Most of us like a degree of structure in our lives (that's part of what makes holidays great – a change is as good as a rest, we say), and after a break in routine, we can appreciate the rhythm and order of our days again.

After all that Mary and Joseph had been through, the extraordinary events surrounding Jesus birth, it was perhaps comforting and reassuring to take part in this prescribed ritual, of going to the temple, an action that united them to every other parent in the Jewish faith.

Both of our readings today centre around the Temple.

In our first reading from the prophet Malachi we hear that the Lord is coming to his temple, coming suddenly. And he will be coming in judgement. The judgement will begin in the temple, the place that should know best how to keep God's commandments. It will continue out into the community seeking out those who are dealing unjustly and not protecting the rights of the workers, widows and orphans. There will be judgement, purification, a cleansing.

It's perhaps a strange reading to pair with Jesus' presentation in the temple as a baby. It resonates more surely with the dramatic picture of Jesus entering the temple as an adult to overturn the traders tables and cleanse the temple. Nevertheless, here it is today as our thoughts turn away from Christmas and towards Lent and Holy Week, to themes of repentance and cleansing preparation.

In the gospel, Mary and Joseph are taking part in an ancient custom and practice. In obedience to Jewish law, Mary went to the Temple in Jerusalem both to be purified 40 days after the birth of her baby, and to present Jesus to God as her firstborn.

This idea of purification after childbirth may seem alien to our modern ideas but there is a service in the Church of England Book of Common prayer for the 'churching' of women which was common practice until around the 1950's. It is also titled The Thanksgiving for Women after Childbirth and, whilst many women saw it as a thanksgiving for coming through the dangers of labour, others felt that they were being labelled unclean or tainted. It is a shame that this practice, which has been discontinued, held such negative associations, for there is surely a place for some rite of passage after such a life changing experience. In the case of a healthy birth a time for thanksgiving but in all circumstances our rites and rituals also give us permission to grieve and lament, give us space for joy and to announce a new status or phase in our lives. In all of life we need to be able to come before God, in the temple, in our churches or our homes, and ask for blessing, claim a fresh start and give thanks that God is a God of love, who holds us in our worst experiences and is with us in our new beginnings.

It is this God of love who keeps his promises whom Simeon and Anna knew so intimately through their dedication to prayer. They knew God to be present in the joy of seeing the Messiah and would be present in the pain that Mary would feel in her lifetime.

It is this same God who walks with us through these harrowing times of illness and death. In these days when we see life in the raw stripped of all that distracts we can ask God to purify our hearts, renew us and lead us on.