

The Presentation of Christ – 2 February 2025

Message – All are included

Creator, Merciful High Priest, and Help to those who are being tested, transform us into your likeness. **Amen.**

Having asked last week, ‘To whom do you need to extend lovingkindness, mercy, in your life?’ And, touched on God’s design of unity in diversity the previous week. This week we have an opportunity to think about some of the specific blind spots both we and our society may have.

I have previously mentioned the woman-man parallels in Luke’s gospel. There are thirteen of them, including Simeon and Anna. Luke really wanted to get his point across. Simeon and Anna are introduced in strikingly similar language. Nonetheless, there are also striking differences.

We are not told much about Simeon. He has been waiting for this day, when he will see God’s salvation, which is how he speaks of the infant Jesus, and that the Holy Spirit is upon him. We do not know his age, his tribe, his status. He possibly takes on the role of a priest in blessing the family and some commentators think we are supposed to be reminded of Samuel being brought to the temple.

His message is one for Jesus and his parents. It is of course for us as well. It is a message of inclusion. Christ is *‘a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’*

Christ came for all, not just for the people of Israel. In the midst of Mary and Joseph’s faithful following of the law of the Lord, they are told that their child is here to consol and

comfort everyone. The same root word lies behind consolation and the Johannine word comforter, used for the holy spirit. Whatever nation we are a part of, we are invited into God's Kingdom and the Christ light shows us the way.

We are told somewhat more about Anna. There is considerable ambiguity in the way that her age is expressed in the Greek. Is she eighty-four, or has she been a widow for eighty-four years. While we may feel more at ease with the former reading, if it was the latter reading, she would be one-hundred and five which is the same age as Judith (*Judith 16:23*), in the book of the same name in the Apocrypha. Judith is essentially a prophetess and saves the people of Israel. The ambiguity of Anna's age might even be intentional, an invitation to make a link for those who know the story.

As a prophetess, we may assume that the Holy Spirit is upon her as it was on Simeon. We are told that, *'She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.'* For Simeon we are only told he was righteous and devout. Perhaps Luke is making sure that we are in no doubt in the case of Anna!

We are told her age and in the society of her day, an elderly widow was unlikely to be highly regarded. Yet it is made clear to us that she has continued to trust in God. God's spirit can rest on young and old alike, female and male alike. God's image resides equally in all of us.

We are also told the tribe that she comes from, Asher. While the tribe itself has no particular significance, it is a northern kingdom tribe, where Jerusalem is the focus of the

southern kingdom. She is a symbol of the two kingdoms of Israel greeting the consolation of Israel. There is a reuniting of Israel as well as the drawing in of all the nations.

I have long felt slightly peeved that Anna does not get her own canticle. There is even some thought that there may have been a canticle associated with Anna in the source material that Luke is drawing in. If there was, we do not know what it was. However, in reading the text again this time, I was struck by the Anna's sharing of the revelation beyond those who already knew.

Simeon is helping Mary and Joseph to understand more of what it means that Jesus is the Christ. Anna is sharing that news with all who will listen. For an interesting comparison, the eleven apostles will fail to believe the women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Anna at least knew who would want to hear the news.

The roles of Simeon and Anna's are complementary, one is there with the detail, one is sharing the news, spreading the word. Together, they express unity in diversity.

Luke's inclusion does not stop there. He also makes it clear that Mary and Joseph are poor. The offering for a first born son was a lamb and a dove. The offering of two doves was a concession in the law for those who could not afford a lamb. The Holy Family are not numbered among the rich and famous, this is a humble, holy, and faithful family.

Luke's gospel challenges any sense that prosperity is a sign of holiness and favour with God. Here is just one of the places where it does that: Jesus is born into a poor family.

This whole passage also highlights the presence of holy and faithful people within Israel. Luke is making it abundantly clear that Jesus is a Jew and that there are other faithful Jews following the Law of the Lord in his day. It is certainly not everyone who is motivated to seek God in the way that Anna and Simeon, Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah are but they are also not alone.

The words of the prophets are often words of judgement against Israel, but they are also interwoven with words of hope. God is a God of love and provides hope and a way for all of us to follow.

My wondering is how we as a church allow everyone to play their part and how we manage to value and support every person in their diversity to be a part of the unity that is the body of Christ. How do we ensure that young and old, women and men, people of every nation, people of every status, all the people of this community, in their very considerable diversity can experience life in all its fullness.

We have much work to be done. We have made some faltering steps forward. But often we are blind to the challenges that others face.

When I was a curate, Pat, who was one of the first women ordained was my rural dean, the equivalent of our archdeacons, tried to model a different kind of leadership that was not all about competition but rather was about supporting one another within our clergy chapter.

I cannot tell whether the male clergy were oblivious to this, couldn't adjust, or outright rejected the idea of supporting one another. But every month, when asked to share how

life was going and how we might support them, they would share how heroically they had done more than any of the other clergy in the chapter. You may use whatever kind of colourful language you choose of this kind of behaviour. I am sure that most of you have seen it at some point in life. It did not give me a lot of confidence in my colleagues.

It is a failure on several fronts but most significantly it is a failure to be the body of Christ in which we build up one another, support one another, and use all of our gifts and talents to the very best of our ability.

I am sure every member of that chapter had some great skills and also some noticeable weaknesses. Being vulnerable in such a context takes a certain kind of courage or, alternatively, a firm belief that it is the right thing to do and that we must model a different way of being.

Such leadership is a different kind of leadership from that which we normally see. When I became a curate without an incumbent, Pat was the one who offered support even though she had very considerable pressures on her life. I hope that we were able to support each other through our shared vulnerability.

Perhaps vulnerability is what we learn from Simeon and Anna. They hoped their message would be received but they could not be certain of it. They trusted and shared.

If we are to learn how to support one another it will require vulnerability. This also requires receptivity and appropriately returned vulnerability. It may seem to require courage but really it is just about doing what is loving because that is what we are called to do and be.