

Homily preached at King's College Cambridge

Candlemas 2018

We have reached the fortieth and last day of the great Christmas season. We have celebrated the birth of Jesus, a birth as ignominiously lowly as his death. But it is a lowliness in which the infinitely powerful God of all creation immerses himself in the powerlessness and mess of a single human existence, and restores the whole of humanity from within. The divine spark in each of us is offered the chance to flame up, towards and into glory. A light is lit which can never go out: it is unquenchable, whatever the gusts and gales of adversity.

The lowliness, the sacred humility of this divine intervention in the world characterises the story of Christ's presentation in the Temple. Mary and Joseph can only afford the offering of the poor, two humble pigeons. Simeon and Anna are both ordinary denizens of the Temple, at least to the eyes of any who noticed them. Their little ceremony would have been an out-of-the-way huddle amidst the crowds of the outer courtyard.

But, we soon see, Simeon and Anna have a holiness and prophetic hopefulness that transcend their apparent ordinariness. Simeon, it turns out, is not the old fool who's been telling people for years that he will see the promised saviour before he dies. He is in the line of the prophets, those given insight into how things really are and how things will turn out to be. He believed this revelation would come. He recognises it when it arrives, even though it is just another scrawny, poor baby. And then he prophesies, in the sense that we use the word.

There is the prophecy in his song, the song sung here every day at Evensong. This unpropitious-looking baby is going to be the light to lighten the entire world; the crowning glory of the history of the Jewish people, God's first chosen people. It is worth spending time with this scene prayerfully, immersing ourselves in it imaginatively. The moment of recognition of who this tiny baby was and would be, by a no doubt rheumy-eyed old man, is utterly remarkable to contemplate.

Simeon's forward-looking prophesy continues. *This child is set for the falling and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign that shall be spoken against.* Jesus will antagonise the keepers of orthodoxy; he will be a scandal, a stumbling block over which many will trip. But some will get up again, because of his teaching, because of what his very presence communicates; and because of what he achieves in what drives a sword through his mother's heart – his agony, his rising, his second leave-taking.

That talk of trials to come, that talk of a sword remind us of the seriousness in all this: the good news is shot through with, you might say, a certain astringency. Not harshness, certainly not cruelty: more a kind of forensic slicing into the reality and weakness of human lives (the way we tend to live them). Malachi, prophetic forebear of Simeon, captures this in his language of refining fire and the purifying of precious metal. This might sound alarming, even terrifying. But the God who is doing this is the God of love, not the God of the Aztecs. There is purifying, but we are precious. There is refining, but the heat of the fire is the white heat of divine love, not the black fire of mythical wrath.

We heard about another kind of sword here last night, not by accident, in the Letter to the Hebrews:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

This sounds as scary as refining fire and the sword of Mary's grief. But again, it is about our being invigorated, revived, not injured or laid waste: because this penetration of our interior world is by the word of God. And that word is not, first and foremost, the word found on a page; but the word who was in the beginning with God, who pitched his tent among us, born in obscure ordinariness – and who is the light that enlightens us: shines into our darkness, and lightens our load. *Jesus is the Word, and to him be the glory, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.*