

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Candlemas

'For mine eyes have seen thy salvation'.

We have come today to the end of the great winter season of Christianity that began on Advent Sunday. Advent is about looking forward and Candlemas balances by coming to a focussed moment of fulfilment and completion. In between, the Christ child is born at Christmas and revealed at Epiphany - itself a season and not just a day as the manifestation to the magi was only one of the three great signs, the other two being the baptism of Christ and the miracle of water into wine at Cana in Galilee. In all three, something different, but equally wonderful, of the glory of God, was revealed in Jesus Christ.

Candlemas comes at the end of all this and invites us to think of what fulfilment and completion might look like for us. For old Simeon, who has been waiting for something really special, it was this particular child, brought along by two poor parents (their offering of two turtle doves being the most modest gift that would be acceptable, the well-to-do would have been far more extravagant and offered a more expensive sacrifice). For old Simeon, there was something about this particular child that he could see, or intuit, that caused him to relax into acceptance that the purpose of his own life had been achieved and that he, faithful watchman for the Lord that he was, could at last go in peace.

Simeon saw Jesus and experienced completeness; he loosened his grip and started to let go. 'Letting go' is perhaps one of the things that we do when we are fulfilled, when we have a deep sense of completeness. This spiritual experience of completeness, the ultimate, the eternal, puts everything else

in perspective and encourages us to let go of the things that don't matter so much.

The gift of the Christ Child and the revelation of God's love are intended to allow us to let go of the things in our life that are less worthy. To let go of everything that is negative or less than fully worthy of us. Let's consider just a few of the things that we might let go, if we share with Simeon that sense of the full completeness that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Faith in Christ certainly invites us to let go of worry and anxiety - to relax our grip on our all too precious concerns about all that is uncertain. It also invites us to drop altogether our desire to control the future. Jesus made this quite explicit both in his teaching and his example. He didn't seek to make people worry, quite the contrary - he said 'don't worry'. His method was to comfort and assure them and to bring them to a form of acceptance of life that is only possible when grounded in faith. It's a message that many need to hear today when the dominant philosophies and life styles of our culture, which put the individual front and centre, lead to epidemics of anxiety. The gospel says let go of all that, both the self-focus and the anxiety that flows from it.

Not that it's easy to do so. It's difficult to let go when our instincts tell us to hold on tight. If you don't believe me try abseiling or take a turn on a rollercoaster. And there are, of course, forms of anxiety that are deeper than our own capacity for self-control, but even that sort of clinical anxiety needs to be put into some sort of relationship with our faith. A person of faith who is chronically anxious at a deep level might be helped a bit if they are encouraged and supported in not worrying about their anxiety! A small step, perhaps, but better than the alternative in which anxiety is compounded by anxiety - or for that matter guilt. For the true Christian

gospel is not guilt inducing but responsibility affirming and weakness accepting.

Another area where the gospel message of letting go is important is that of forgiveness. The Greek word translated 'forgive' in the New Testament means 'let go' - let go of anger, bitterness, hatred and resentment. Modern scholarship and human sensitivity to the importance of justice mean that we appreciate more fully now that there are times when we might be wrong to forgive too quickly, or without any evidence that those who have hurt us care about what they have done or intend not to repeat their harm to us in the future. Nonetheless there is a place for the deep Christian doctrine of letting go after harm. We might need to hold onto our cool indignation, but we still need to let go of our hot hatred and enraged desire for revenge. The gospel message is never that you must be a doormat or be complicit in the bad treatment you receive, but there is the possibility of letting go of the excessive reaction so that the prospect of reconciliation remains open, even if there needs to be a strong dose of justice before it can be realised.

Then there is the letting go that we saw in Simeon - the letting go of our desire for life itself; letting go of ourselves when we have come to the end of our days. There is lively debate about this matter too - indeed whether such letting go is something that it is only right to do when the natural process of death is upon us or whether we might seek to hasten that process through assisted dying when our suffering is intolerable. This is an issue which is genuinely agonising, and where the desire to protect the vulnerable and the equally noble one to ease the circumstances of those in pain and despair creates a conflict of compassions, a problem which I can hardly bear to think about so difficult is it to imagine a satisfactory resolution. The only sensible thing I can think to say is that we need to

remain open to the agony that comes with compassionate care in all circumstances.

And death itself brings a fourth area of letting go - the letting go that the bereaved must do when a loved one passes away. This too is a complex cultural process with many nuances. Letting go here doesn't mean forgetting – indeed active remembering is as much part of healthy grief as positive letting go. Acceptance of loss involves remembering what it is that we have lost, not just forgetting about it - about him - or her.

The point that this brief survey of faithful letting go brings home to me is that letting go isn't often an 'either or' matter. It's not something to be understood in binary terms. Rather, is a subtle process with many nuances and in human terms is perhaps never entirely complete; whether it is letting go of worry or anger, or life, or a loved one.

It is our faith that compels us to seek to let go - and it is our maturity that helps us to understand that the letting go process is subtle. We need both faith and the maturity if we are to live wisely. And if we do we find ourselves in solidarity with old Simeon who, when he sees the light of God, is at last able to let go in fulfilment and peace.

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Malachi 3.1-5; Luke 2.22-41*