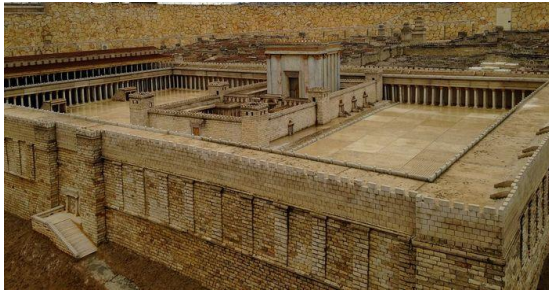


Sermon for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – 29 January 2023

Psalm 36:5-10, Luke 2:22-40

We're travelling again today! Last week, we were in Capernaum on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, and today we're much further down south, in Jerusalem, in Judea. We're also making a huge jump back in time: Jesus is just a few weeks old. And according to the Law of Moses, his parents are expected to come to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice that is stated in the law for every first born boy.



It is difficult to imagine the temple of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' birth, because today, only the western wall remains. But when you look at that huge wall, you do get a sense of the immensity of the building. It was like a town in the middle of the city. Four enormous restraining walls were built around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In between those four walls was a vast paved plaza of more than

140 thousand square meters. The walls above ground rose ten stories tall and the overall dimensions of the Temple were staggering.

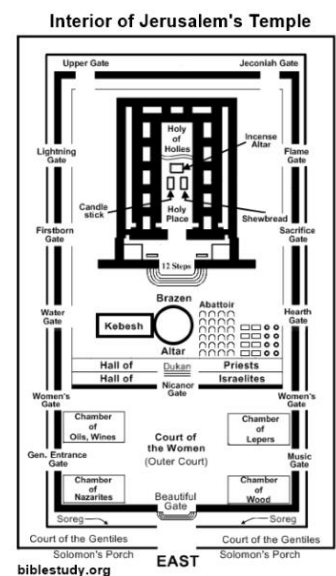
So now imagine little Mary and Joseph with their baby arriving at the gigantic structure. It must have been awesome, not necessarily in a good way. And once you arrived, you needed to know where to go. You came in through Solomon's porch, then you had the Court of the Gentiles, and if you were Jewish, then you could come in through the Beautiful Gate into the Outer Court. Quite intimidating. From the Outer Court, you were allowed further in if you were bringing a sacrifice.

At the time of Jesus, a market was allowed to reside in the Outer Court. That is where Mary and Joseph bought their sacrificial animals, two little turtledoves. There was also a whole abattoir in the Temple, where the animals were slaughtered and then to be presented as burnt offerings.

And in all that noise and hubbub, in the milling about of people, the great crowd of worshippers, one man spotted Mary and Joseph from afar.

Simeon had been waiting for this moment. He believed that his life would not be over until the light of the world came here, to the Temple, 'to take over its work of shining brightly'.¹ We know little about Simeon, but from our reading today, he sounds like a good man, peaceful and devout, a man to whom people would turn for wisdom, knowledge, advice, prayer. He sounds like an older man, weary perhaps of coming day in day out to the Temple and hoping that today will be the day when word of the Holy Spirit would come true.

There is really nothing special about Mary and Joseph that day in the Temple. An older man, a tired young mother, a tiny baby, one among many come for the exact same reason. But when Simeon



¹ Cottrell, Stephen, *Walking Backwards to Christmas*, published by SPCK, 2014

sees them, it's as if his heart skips a beat. He makes a bee line to them, takes the child in his arms and recognises the baby as the Saviour of the world.



And 'when Simeon speaks, scales fall. He praises God, saying that at last he can depart in peace and, in time, leave the world behind him, for he has seen with his own eyes the salvation of God and the fulfilment of God's promises, not just to Israel, but to the whole world.'²

The words of Simeon echo the words of the psalmist who praises God for his love that reaches to the heavens and for his faithfulness. 'How priceless is your unfailing love, O God, for with you is the fountain of life, in your light we see light' we read in Psalm 36.

The presentation of Christ in the Temple is a story of light. It is also a story of darkness. Much like a stained-glass window, Luke paints a picture of many colours.

It is a subtle picture. The dark tones speak of suffering. Simeon is waiting for God to *comfort* Israel. He lives in a world of patient hope, where suffering has become a way of life – very much like our world today. And it now appears that God's chosen redeemer will deal with this suffering by sharing it himself. Simeon speaks dark words about opposition, and about a sword that will pierce Mary's heart as well. This, Luke is saying, is what happens when the kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of the world. The child who is, as Simeon says, 'destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel' will pass through death and into resurrection, taking with him the hopes and fears of the world.



The bright tones speak of the light that has dawned not just for Israel, but for the whole world: salvation is for all people, without distinction, 'a light for revelation to the nations, and glory for God's people Israel'. These bright tones are also the colours of human beings, not just those who worship in the Temple, but all people, all different and equally important to God. By the time we finish the second chapter of Luke's gospel, all of us can more or less find someone with whom we can identify. We have met an older couple, surprised to have a child at last; we have seen a young girl even more surprised to have a child so soon, and her husband coming with her to the Temple; then we will see Jesus himself, soon to be a young adult; and in this passage, we have the old man and woman, worshipping God night and day and praying for the salvation of his people.

Luke wants to draw readers of every age and every stage of life into this picture. No matter who you are or where you are, the story of Jesus can become your story³.

And in becoming your story, it will become your vocation. We all have our own role in God's plan. For some, it will be active, perhaps in the public eye, or taking the love of God to meet the practical needs of the world. For others, it will be quiet, away from public view, praying 'God act and fulfil your promises'. For many, it will be a mixture of the two, sometimes one, sometimes the other.

² Cottrell, Stephen, *Walking Backwards to Christmas*, published by SPCK, 2014

³ Wright, Tom, *Luke for Everyone*, published by SPCK, 2004

Mary and Joseph needed Simeon and Anna at that moment; the old man and old woman needed them, and now thanked God for them. The births of John the Baptist and Jesus are already beginning their work of drawing people of all sorts into new worship and fellowship⁴.

How will you let yourselves be drawn into this picture? How will you let God show you his unfailing love? How will you, his beloved children, play your part in God's salvation plan?

I pray that you will take refuge in the shadow of his wings, that he may comfort, strengthen and guide you in the weeks and months to come.

Amen.

⁴ Wright, Tom, *Luke for Everyone*, published by SPCK, 2004