



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Obedient, Alert and Faithful

Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-18 ; Luke 2:22-40

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Today is feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. It is the last day of the season of Epiphany. Remember, I said last week that *epiphany* means “revealed to.” This is the season in the Church calendar in which we focus on how Christ was revealed to the world.

The Old Testament reading was from Malachi. The key verse today features the word messenger twice and interestingly the word for messenger is *malaki*.

The first mention of “messenger” in v1 is interpreted by Jesus himself as John the Baptist.¹ John’s father Zechariah also quoted this verse in his prophecy to his infant son, “And you, child, shall be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him.”²

The verse continues:

“Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.”³

The messenger of the covenant is the Messiah as prophesied in Isaiah 42:

“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”⁴

So the thrust of this passage is of John the Baptist coming first followed by the Messiah coming to the temple and then rolling on with hints of the cleansing of the temple perhaps to a greater fulfillment when Christ returns. Yet just as the vibration of a string has resonances at different frequencies, so prophecies can resound in multiple fulfillments. Christ being brought to the temple as an infant may be seen as a subharmonic of the main fulfillment of this prophecy.

¹ Mt 11:10

² Lk 1:76

³ Mal 3:1b

⁴ Isaiah 42:6-7

What was happening in the temple?

This was not the circumcision which was to be done on the eighth day of life. That was briefly described in the previous verse. This event we are considering was after 40 days. Joseph & Mary were obeying the Biblical Law by:

- cleansing after childbirth – in the Law any emission of blood caused ceremonial uncleanness;
- dedicating their son to God;
- redeeming a firstborn.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us it was necessary for all the normal provisions of the Law to apply to Jesus too. He too was to be redeemed as a firstborn even though he was the great firstborn. He too was to be dedicated to the Lord even though he was God. He had to be as one of his people to represent his people.

As they take their child into the temple, they meet Simeon who was waiting for “the Consolation of Israel.”⁵ This was a Jewish expression for the expected Messiah. We see it most clearly in the Isaiah passage from which Jesus later quoted: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to comfort [or console] all who mourn...”⁶

Luke tells us about Simeon:

- a. The Holy Spirit was on him.
- b. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him he would see the Messiah before he died.
- c. Moved by the Spirit he went to the temple that day.
- d. Had a revelation that this baby was the one!

As he meets the holy family, he recognizes this 6 week old baby is the Messiah. He praises God in the wonderful words we call the “Nunc Dimittis” - the opening words in Latin for “Now Dismiss.”

What does he understand:

- This child is salvation for all peoples.
- This child is a light of revelation to the gentile nations.
- This child is the glory of the people of Israel.

The revealing of Christ in flesh has occurred for the first time in the temple – epiphany!

With the God’s promise fulfilled, Simeon is content and ready to die. He has lived focused on this promise God had given him. He had waited and waited. Do you remember I said a while ago that the Hebrew word for “wait” also means “expect” and “hope”. We may put a negative connotation on waiting, but for them positivity is built into the word – to wait is to expect and to hope. Simeon had expected to see the Messiah. He had hoped to encounter the Messiah. He had believed the promise and now his waiting was over; with his hope and expectation fulfilled, he was satisfied.

His prophecy to the parents unveils some insights into the future they and especially Mary would see. The Messiah would bring division because of people’s reactions to him. Their thoughts and intentions would be made plain because of encountering him. Some of the great will be cast down and the humble would be lifted up as Mary herself prophesied in the Magnificat.

What enabled Simeon to recognise in this baby the promised Messiah? What do we know of him? He was righteous and devout. He believed what he sensed God say to him and invested in that truth. In other words, he waited for the promised Messiah rather than dismiss the idea that he would see him as a fantasy.

What can we do to stay spiritually supple all our lives? What might make us spiritually stiff in the joints?

⁵ Lk 2:25

⁶ Is 61:1-2

What might stop us being in tune with what God wants to communicate to us or what he wants us to be doing? When we have waited a long time we can resent the waiting. Why should God keep **me** waiting? Why didn't he answer **me** when **I** wanted him to? Why didn't he answer **me** the way **I** wanted him to? Why?! As I say those words, I hear that words, "**me, me, I, me, I.**" But who is boss? Who rules? It is not "**I**" but He!

Is there any area in our lives or thinking where we resent what God has not done - or the way he has done it - or whom he used? If so, we need to get off the throne and acknowledge he is the ruler of all, not us.

Perhaps we might be so sure we know how God must speak or act that we will not allow that he would do otherwise. Perhaps we are so sure of the plan he ought to have that anything else would be out of the question. Then we would refuse to accept it; then we would reject it.

That was the problem for the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They could not accept that he was different from the Messiah they accepted and so they rejected him.

When people do this, they have prejudged the situation. That is called "prejudice." Of course, none of us is prejudiced – only other people deserve that label. But do I prejudice what God can, or should do or will do? Do I demand he must do it the way I think he should? Do you? Do we?

If so, we need to get off the throne and let the Creator organize things the way he knows is best.

Part of getting off the throne is to repent, to change your mind. If we resent how God may choose to act or prejudice how he must act, then we need to repent of those attitudes and let him rule.

Anna

There is another character who comes onto the scene to join them. Anna is 84 years old and very devout. She lived in the temple compound, worshipping by night and by day and often fasting and praying. She too is drawn to meet the family and see the promised Messiah. She thanks God and goes off to tell all who were longing for the Messiah, described as looking forward to the redemption of Israel.

At the age of 84, she goes off to tell people about the Messiah. We know far more than she did, how quick are we to tell people about Jesus?

Hope Project

This year, the Hope Project is going ahead. The support at the close of the year reached \$800,000. That was good but not the necessary threshold for the full scale project. The board of the Hope Project have recast the vision to one booklet into every letterbox and one advert on TV instead of a series of three. They are now asking all who pledged whether they will confirm their pledge with the changed scale of the project. I will be contacting all of you we have on record as giving or pledging to the project to learn whether you wish to confirm or withdraw your support.

However, I think the project will and should go ahead. It gives us a chance to tell the nation the gospel in this 200th year since it was first preached in this land. For the project to work we need to be ready to talk to others about Jesus. That is just what Anna did: "The Messiah has come. Do you see that couple there, their baby is the Messiah. He's here. God told me! He told Simeon too. You know I hear him sometimes, well ..."

There is also a proposal by Graham Braddock that he will do a pavement chalk drawing of his "Via Dolorosa" painting in the new Silverdale Shopping Centre as an Easter talking point. Members of local churches will get the opportunity to be available to talk to people about it. It is using the Hope Project's concept of

conversational evangelism. We are planning to get Dave Mann (instigator of the Hope Project) back again to speak on the Peninsula at the end of March to give us some more training to help prepare for this event.

Devotion

Like Simeon, Anna is devout, worships, prays and attends to God's instructions. Mary and Joseph did everything required by God's Law and returned to Jerusalem each year for Passover. It is these people who give priority to God's ways and his instructions who are used in his purposes.

To attend to God's ways and his commands; to invest time in prayer and worship - these things are good for us, and they may help us to be in a spiritual state where God is able to use us in his purposes. We can find examples and encouragements in the long obedience of Anna, the alertness of Simeon and the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph.