



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

Sermon

What will you do?

Luke 2:22-40; Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18

2 February 2020

© 2020 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Today is feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. It is the last day of Epiphany. Remember, *Epiphany* means “revealed.” This is the season of the Church calendar in which we focus on Christ being revealed to the world. It may seem an odd sequence of readings we have followed. I think the reason is that Epiphany runs until the anniversary of the infant being presented in the temple. The Jewish Law decreed an offering had to be made 40 days after the birth of a baby boy. So the Church Calendar celebrates this event 40 days after Christmas. If you count from Christmas 40 days inclusively you get to 2nd February - today.

In the intervening weeks we have been shown other instances of Christ being revealed: the coming of the Magi, the baptism of Christ, John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus and (last week) Jesus starting his public ministry.

The Old Testament reading was from Malachi. The key verse was:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

The first “messenger” turns out to be John the Baptist. When, later on, Jesus was asked about John, he quoted this portion of the verse to explain who John was.¹

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.”²

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

¹ Mt 11:10

² Mal 3:1b

"I, the LORD, ... will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.³

So the verse from Malachi says that John the Baptist would come first to prepare the way for the Messiah who would come to the temple. It rolls on with hints of the cleansing of the temple and to a greater fulfilment when Christ returns. Just as the vibration of a string has resonances at different frequencies, so prophecies can resound in multiple fulfilments. Christ being brought to the temple as an infant may be seen as a subharmonic of the main fulfilment of this prophecy.

What was happening in the temple?

This was not the circumcision - that was done on the eighth day of life – usually at home by the father. It was briefly described in the verse before our reading. This event we are considering was after 40 days. Joseph & Mary were obeying the Biblical Law by:

- cleansing after childbirth – in the Law any shedding 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.

Simeon

As they take their child into the temple, they meet Simeon who was waiting for “the Consolation of Israel.”⁴ 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...”⁵ You know that a title Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit was the Comforter. He said he would ask the Father who would send another comforter. Jesus was the first comforter, the Holy Spirit was another. This consolation or comfort of Israel is directly connected. The comforter in Greek is, *parakletos*, the comfort is *paraklesis*.

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. He was moved by the Spirit he went to the temple that day.
- d. He had a revelation that this baby was the one!
- e. He prophesied over the child and to Mary in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

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, your servant, Lord.”

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 – there has been an epiphany!

³ Isaiah 42:6-7

⁴ Lk 2:25

⁵ Is 61:1-2

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. We may feel impatient about waiting but there is a positive sense was built into this word – in Hebrew, the word for “wait” also means “expect” and “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 hope and expectation fulfilled, he was satisfied.

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 acted on what he heard. How did he do that? First by waiting for the promised Messiah and then by speaking his message when he was given the knowledge that this as the one.

What can we do to stay spiritually supple all our lives? What might make us spiritually stiff in the joints? 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. Getting off the throne is a way of saying: “Repent, 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?

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. 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.

Alpha Course

We are about to run the Alpha course again starting in 2 weeks. I suggest that it offers possibilities for responses along the lines I have just advanced.

Anna went out and told people about the Christ. Alpha gives you an easy way to invite people to hear about Christ – will you invite someone and bring him/her along.

Simeon was responsive to the Holy Spirit: He heard him, obeyed him, spoke out the inspired words he was given by the Spirit. One of the aspects of the Alpha Course is it not only introduces Jesus but also the Holy Spirit and offers a time to be prayed for to receive the Holy Spirit and his gifts. If you are a bit unsure or confused by this Christianity or if you are wanting the gift of the Holy Spirit, come along. It's for you!

Mary, Joseph, Anna and Simeon all acted in obedience to worship and serve the Lord. Maybe God is calling you to offer service so we can properly fill the places in the Alpha team. Do consider helping with cooking, serving, childcare etc.

The signup sheets are on the table in the foyer. Invitations are there too. What will you do?

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.