

Sermon Jan 29

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The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

The prophet Malachi spoke these words many many years before the birth of Jesus, and I can imagine that the Jewish people would have been expecting a powerful Lord, arriving triumphantly into his own temple, with pomp and ceremony, and many attendants.

But we heard in our reading from Luke's Gospel how the Lord whom they sought *did* actually come to his temple, not as a powerful ruler, but as a tiny baby! Not at all what was expected. Right from the very beginning of Jesus' life, and even before, from his conception, he was turning the world and its expectations upside down! The Lord was carried into his own temple in the arms of his parents. These days, maybe he would have been in a car-seat, tucked up with a blankie.

What happened at the temple? Simeon recognised the baby as the one he had been told he would see – the Lord's Messiah! Instead of falling before him in worship, Simeon took the baby in his arms!

Let's have a look at what Simeon said:

my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

First, let's think about the last bit – 'for glory to your people Israel.' Simeon was stating Jesus' role as the fulfiller of the prophecies about the Messiah.

When we look back into the reading from Malachi we can see more of that role -

‘For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.’

This is quite a telling passage, because it speaks of the future of the Jewish people in God. Those of the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah would be refined and purified, and something new and pure and beautiful would come forth from them. But it sounds a bit painful doesn’t it? Being refined in a fire, just like ore is smelted.

My son and his mate have a fascination with metals, and their current goal is to take electronic waste and refine it so they can get the precious metals off. Gold is used in computer parts because it is such a good conductor of electricity. These two lads are trying all sorts of methods to refine the metals – they are using heat, but in order to get it hot enough – about 1000 degrees, they need to use more than a regular fire, and add extra oxygen. They are using chemicals – strong acids to dissolve the unwanted plastic and the matrix that the gold is in. Heaven knows what else they have in mind, but they assure me that they know what they are doing, and it’s perfectly safe! I have my doubts.

If Jesus is the refiner’s fire, to purify the sons of Levi, that means there will be many challenges for these temple servants. Things will get very hot! Things will get sour! I wonder if this is referring to the burning away of all the accretions that the Jewish religion had acquired from the time of Abraham to the time when Simeon held the baby Jesus in the temple , all the extra rules

and regulations, all the rules that the Pharisees insisted on being upheld. They were seeking righteousness by following rules, but with the refiner's fire, all this would be stripped away, till only the precious remained. What is that precious thing? This we can see in the life and ministry of Jesus. It comes down to one thing, one thing in two parts. Love God, love your neighbour. Just love. All you need is love, as the Beatles declared in 1967.

This love is the light for revelation to the Gentiles!

The world that Jesus was born into was a very different place to ours. Before his life and teaching, there was no such thing as human rights. People were traded as slaves, and if you were poor you had no rights, no dignity, and if you died, well, too bad. That's what was your destiny. The rich and powerful were hugely so. Even their own children were not immune to their cruelty. When a Greek or Roman mother gave birth, the father had the right to decide whether he would acknowledge the baby. If he decided, no, I don't want this child, - maybe because it was a girl, or deformed, or he couldn't be sure it was his - the child would be exposed. This means left outside on a hillside, exposed to the elements and wild animals. Yes, many thousands of children were thrown away in this way.

How horrible!

But when Jesus came to the world, he brought that light, to lighten the Gentiles. He brought the message of love and worthiness to every individual.

We can see a hint of his universal message in the scene at the temple. It is made clear that it was not just the elderly priest Simeon who held baby Jesus, and prophesied over him. There was another person there - the prophetess

Anna. Luke doesn't report what she said, just that she began to 'speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.' If he didn't know what her words were, - and Luke was a very good researcher, so if anyone had recorded or remembered them he would probably have found them – if he didn't even know what she said, why even mention her? Because she was a woman, and this balance of the good news being for men and women, for equality in God's love, was an important part of Jesus' mission. Here, he was preaching it even as a tiny baby! Perhaps we can see this as the first message of Jesus! He came for everyone. No longer would it be right for Roman fathers to take a newborn baby away from its mother and discard it. Women had rights, and baby girls were precious too.

This may seem self-evident to us now, but we have had two thousand years of Christian conditioning.

The light that Jesus brought into the world changed everything. It shaped Western civilisation. Hospitals, charities, help for disabled, for victims and prisoners, all sprang up where the Christian message was preached. Members of the early church would scour the hillsides for those abandoned babies, and take them in and care for them. There would be no orphanages without Christ. Christian people began to care for the sick, not just other believers, but anyone in need. People around them commented, perplexed, not understanding why they did it.

The very idea of human rights derives from Jesus' teaching. Without Christianity we would not have humanism, united nations, or the black lives matter movement. These things might seem secular, but they are all imbued with the light of God's love.

We might think that the world is in a post-Christendom era, with falling attendance in our churches, but when we look around at all the kindnesses that people do for one another, we can trace the influence of the Light that came into the world.

That light was tiny to start with – just one candle burning in the darkness, in the form of a tiny Jewish baby. But with 2 millennia of shining, that light has spread throughout all the earth, lighting up dark places.

Unfortunately, there are still places where that light needs to shine. There are still children abandoned, people abused, trafficked into slavery.

May we continue to pray and work for the light to shine ever brighter, and dispel all the darkness!