

February 1st, 2026

10.30am Holy Communion All Saints Oakham

Malachi 3. 1-5, Hebrews 2.14-, Luke 2.22-40

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

After my last few sermons on complicated bits of the prophet Isaiah or the gospel of John, it comes as something of a relief to have a relatively straightforward story from Luke's gospel to talk about today. It is the story of Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the Temple on the fortieth day after his birth. They were presumably still living in and around Bethlehem, so travel to Jerusalem was no great problem. This was to meet the requirements of the Mosaic law. Two things were going on here. Firstly that law stated that the first born of any animal and of the first born male child shall be holy to the Lord, a reflection of the events of the Exodus, where the angel of death killed the first born children of the Egyptians. The law required the child to be presented in the temple and a sum paid for the child's redemption, a buying back from God, of five silver shekels. The cynical might say that this is a novel form of taxation, but it was scripturally sanctioned! Perhaps after forty sleepless nights, some might be tempted not to bother buying the child back, and to leave the child for the Temple authorities to look after. This act of redemption isn't recorded by Luke, but it almost certainly happened. The second thing that was going on was the ritual purification of Mary. Again in the Mosaic Law we read that a woman would be unclean for the seven days leading up to their child's circumcision, and for thirty three days afterwards she should be kept away from holy things, giving forty days in total. If the child were female, both these periods would be doubles, so 80 days in total. After this period, the law required sacrifices to be made – a burnt offering of a lamb, or a pigeon if a lamb couldn't be afforded, and a pigeon and a turtle dove for a sin offering. The wording of the gospel in terms of numbers of pigeons and turtle doves is a bit ambiguous, but certainly there was no lamb, indicating that Joseph and Mary weren't able to afford one. They would have brought their offering to a priest in the outer court of the Temple, who would then have sacrificed in their presence and burnt on the altar – a rather messy business no doubt. Mary would thus have become ritually clean once more.

What follows on then is the appearance of Simeon and Anna and the words of prophecies that they uttered. One almost gets the impression from Luke that they just happened to walk by and miraculously recognise the Holy Family. I suspect the truth was much more prosaic. They would undoubtedly have heard of the rather odd events that took place in Bethlehem just over a month before, and were probably counting down the forty days until Jesus and his parents arrived in the Temple. That's not to deny the leading of the Holy Spirit in their recognition of the Holy Family however. The words of Simeon are given first, the words that we know as the Nunc Dimittis. In the first line, Simeon expresses his willingness now to see death, now that he has held the Christ child in his

arms, and this has always been taken to imply that Simeon was an old man. There is nothing in the text that actually says this however. Although doubtless he wasn't a youngster, there is no indication at all of his age. A few decades later Paul, when about forty years old was to write

I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

So a desire for death and what follows doesn't necessarily apply only to the old. He is not described as a prophet, but the words he proclaimed were essentially prophetic in nature. By contrast Anna was undoubtedly old. Again the text in the Greek is a bit ambiguous, but the reading given here that she was eighty four is probably the correct one. And she is described as a prophet- a very rare appellation for a woman in scripture. She is also interestingly described as being of the tribe of Asher - a tribe that had effectively disappeared from history some 600 or more years before when the Israelites were exiled to Assyria. A bit like saying that I am of the Tribe of Mercia! "Of the tribe of Asher" is thus an archaic title, that links her to an older prophetic line. Her father's name is given as Phanuel, which means Face of God, or perhaps "God has turned". This is again a bit odd. The angel Phanuel appears in the apocryphal book of Enoch, which we know was influential around the time of Jesus and is indeed quoted in the New Testament, implicitly in a number of places and explicitly in a quite in the letter of Jude, who was almost certainly Jesus' brother. In Enoch we read of the angels before the face of God.

This first is Michael, the merciful and long-suffering: and the second, who is set over all the diseases and all the wounds of the children of men, is Raphael: and the third, who is set over all the powers, is Gabriel: and the fourth, who is set over the repentance unto hope of those who inherit eternal life, is named Phanuel.

So Anna's father is associated with the angel who represents repentance and the hope of eternal life. Wonderfully appropriate I think.

Both Simeon and Anna just appear at this point in the bible - they come onto stage, speak their words, and leave. A bit like the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek, who just appears, blesses Abraham and then disappear again. Both of them rather mysterious figures. But their words were of very considerable significance. Simeon recognises Jesus as the Messiah, the one who was to bring salvation to his people. It is not really possible to know what he meant by that, but the word salvation has a wide variety of meanings - but primarily being saved or protected from harm, being brought back from exile, being saved from the effect of sin, and the certainty of death, being made whole and being brought into the presence of God. Simeon would have grown up in a society that saw salvation as a specifically Jewish thing, that the nation would be saved from all that assails them. But he had a wider vision - that the salvation was for all, for Jew and Gentile, and that the offer of that salvation was the glory of Israel, the fulfilment of the purpose of the nation. And the Nunc Dimittis abounds in Old Testament allusions if not actual quotations. For example from Isaiah.

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Simeon then goes on to say more to Mary.

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

An early indication of the troubles that were to follow, that Jesus would face people with a choice as to whether to accept or reject him, a choice that would determine their future; that he would be opposed, and reveal the true nature of many; and that his mother too would face the sharp pains of suffering. Anna's words aren't recorded, but the presence of Jesus caused her to praise God and to tell others in the Temple the significance of what she had seen – perhaps in this regard, she was the first missionary preacher.

In all these events we have an interesting contrast. On the one hand, we have the formalised liturgical worship of the Temple, based on the Old Testament law, watched over by a priestly caste. And on the other, almost orthogonally cutting across it, we have the prophetic actions of Simeon and Anna, unconstrained by history and tradition. It was always thus in Jewish history, and we read of the relationships, often tense, between priests and prophets throughout the Old Testament. And here, in the final years of the Jewish cult, and the start of the new age, we see this interaction perhaps for the last time, a changing of the world through the baby in the arms of his mother.

Now over the centuries that followed these events, they took on a wide variety of expressions and meanings. Liturgically, as Christmas developed and became standardised in the west on December 25th, the events were celebrated 40 days after that on February 2nd, and this came to be regarded by many as the final day of the Christmas and Epiphany seasons. The words of the Nunc dimittis also became part of the liturgy, firstly in the service of Compline and more recently in Anglican evensong.

The festival also became a time when candles were blessed in church for both domestic and church use – hence the name Candlemas. As such it took on a seasonal aspect – the first lighting of the new candles as winter drew to a close, a promise of the light of Christ shining in the world. In Ireland, the feast almost coincided with the Gaelic festival of Imbolc on February 1st, which marked the end of winter and the start of spring, and also with the feast of St Bridget or St Bride – an Abbess of the St Patrick era with the same name (and many of the same legends) as an ancient Irish Goddess. So the festival took on a whole variety of seasonal meanings.

The purification aspects of the story also continued into the life of the church, with the development of the rite of churching of women, which nominally took place 40 days after childbirth and was described as a thanksgiving for the birth of a child. But by many it was still regarded as a formal purification of women after the messiness of childbirth. The rite lingered on into the modern age, and perhaps in places still does, with a range of

traditional practices. After I was born, my mother and I went straight from hospital to our Methodist church for a service of thanksgiving, before she was allowed to go home. In some medieval traditions the period between childbirth and churching was also a period when the father was expected to take on more domestic responsibilities – and often referred to as the Gander month. Harry, take note.

Finally over the years, the story was a major influence on artistic development – both in terms of paintings (where Simeon is almost always of course shown as an old man) and also in terms of music – particularly within the Anglican Evensong tradition, where countless settings of the Nunc dimittis, many of great beauty, have been composed over the centuries. There is an irony in this of course – the prophetic voices that cut across the liturgical practices of first century Judaism have become deeply entrenched in Anglican liturgical practices.

So where does that leave us now? On a trivial level, it still marks the end of the Christmas period and the crib will be taken down sometime soon. And it is indeed a time of the changing of the seasons, with the first glimpse of spring, of new life appearing. The snowdrops are beginning to push through in the churchyard. It is a feast that marks the rhythm of the year, and it is to be celebrated for that.

And its influence on our liturgical practices still continues through the music it inspires. A version of the Nunc Dimittis will be sung at the end of this morning's service as well as at Choral Evensong later today. And such is the attachment of many to this particular Anglican style of worship, there is apparently a move to have Choral Evensong recognised as a World Heritage activity, although perhaps not the choirs that sing it. This choral tradition is in my mind one of the riches of the Anglican church, a thing of very great beauty – and, as I have said before, one of the tasks of the church is to give the world around it a taste of beauty and of the presence of God. But care is needed. I have remarked on the irony that the subversive words of the prophets have become entrenched in our liturgical worship, and we need to be very careful that in doing so they do not lose their meaning or their vitality.

But the chief legacy of the gospel events is of course in the prophetic texts themselves. In the baby Jesus, we see the dawning of salvation, the possibility of wholeness, of forgiveness, of becoming who are meant to be through all that Jesus has done for us. And while that is true for each one of us here, it is also true for the whole of humanity in all its fallenness and imperfection. In Jesus, we see the light that will lighten the darkest places of our lives and the ever deepening gloom of the world in which we live. Further, there is no longer a need for rituals of purity, after childbirth or otherwise. In the messiness and bloodiness of the cross, Jesus took away the impurities of all who follow him, once and for all. And that invitation to follow to embrace that light, to turn, day by day, year by year, to Jesus our Lord and Saviour is one for us all. And as for Mary, that may be a difficult and painful road, but our destination is sure and certain, and our future secure.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen