

February 2, 2025 – Candlemas – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Reading: Luke 2.22-40

‘Then suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple.’ It is this word of the prophet Malechi, the final book of the Hebrew Bible, of which we are reminded in today’s Gospel passage of the presentation of our Lord in the temple of Jerusalem. But the big surprise for Jewish listeners who know their classics, is that the Lord enters the temple for the first time in his earthly life, not so much like a refiner’s fire or as the supreme judge, but as a little baby. So for those who see him in the temple on that very day, it is not at all easy to see in this baby boy the long expected Messiah, promised to come by prophets such as Malechi. So at this point, it takes something special to have this moment of great Epiphany, of the manifestation of Christ. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds needed visions of angels telling it to them. The magi used the sign of a special star. And with these other two witnesses, Simeon and Anna in the temple, we hear that it is the Holy Spirit opening their eyes. With these two, Luke gives us two role models, nicely gender balanced, of how to seek and see the Lord. And when they have found Jesus, role models also, because of the way they are filled with fresh insight, joy and hope that they are eager to share with all those around them. So, let us take a closer look at what the Gospel of Luke is telling us more about them, to see what we might learn from it.

To begin with Anna; we read how she went through a great personal tragedy. Losing the love of her life after a marriage of only seven years. Back then, becoming a widow also meant losing your social status and financial security. Widows and orphans were in general living a precarious existence, as they still do in many parts of the world. Being dependent on the charity of others and on the righteousness of their rulers and judges. But this widow found her own way to deal with that great tragedy. She deepened her faith in the face of this hardship. She became regarded as a prophet, devoted to worship God in the temple. Certainly someone with clean hands and a pure heart, as described in Psalm 24. Her great faith enables her to lead a long and good life in the shadow of the Almighty. When she encounters this very special child, she not only thanks and praises God for him, but she starts to spread the good news about the redemption that will bring. Filling those who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem with fresh hope in times that were really quite dark. What a wonderful mission and there is certainly no age limit to do just that and to follow in her footsteps. Despite old age or chronic illness, we can still always thank and praise the Lord, spread faith and bring hope. Hopefully, you have also encountered people like Anna in your life. And hopefully we are, or will become one of them ourselves.

Now on to Simeon. The Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon, is recited at Evensongs and in our night prayer, Compline, with which some of us are very familiar, as we say it together on Zoom every Monday and Tuesday evening, at 9 pm. In our tradition, it is also always read near the end of a funeral service. And this is very fitting and in fact moving. It reminds us at those turning points between being awake and sleeping, and also between life here on earth and life in heaven of that very fundamental truth that brings us faith and hope at a times when we just have to let go of everything else. And so these words of the Song of Simeon may resonate even more deeply within us in the familiar version of our Common Worship prayer book:

‘Lord now let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of every people. A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.’

How was Simeon able to reach that admirable point of great inner calmness and peace? And how was he able to perceive this light and this glory in that little baby presented to him? In this short passage no less than three times the Holy Spirit is mentioned. As the one resting on him (verse 25), revealing to him what was to come (verse 26), and finally when Jesus enters the temple he is moved by the Spirit (verse 27) to go to the temple courts. So, he takes the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God with that song of his. Simeon then blesses his parents and turns specifically to the mother of Jesus ending with those famous words about a sword that will pierce her own soul too. We don't know who Simeon was, what he was doing for a living, not even if he was as old as we tend to think he was and as is depicted in the many paintings of his, such as by Rembrandt. We just have some words about his way of being. He was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel. We could translate this into those famous three virtues that we all know: he was living his life, filled with love, faith and hope.

Today, we have come to the end of this season of Christmas and Epiphany; 40 days of celebration of the light of Christ entering the world to live among us. A season to especially remind us of the eternal source of hope we have in Christ, right at the darkest time of the year. At a time also filled with wars and tribulations in the world we live in, and perhaps personal tragedies and hardships as well. But just like today's role models, Simeon and Anna, we still have every reason to stay hopeful. Not only expecting to meet our Lord at the end of our earthly journey, but also to experience Jesus, his love and redemption, in our daily life and in a special way here in church in word and sacrament. So, let us continue to praise and thank God for him. Continue to be guided and moved by the Spirit to meet him. And continue to share the good news about him with all those around us.