

Reflection for Epiphany 4 The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Luke 2: 22 – 40

Mary and Joseph are following the laws and customs of the time. They bring their firstborn son, Jesus, to the temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. The law dictates that every firstborn male is designated as Holy to the Lord and so must be redeemed by an offering, a pair of turtle doves or a pair of young pigeons. They were doing what countless others had done in the past and would continue to do into the future. As they make their way through the Temple courts, out of the shadows appears an old man, a devout man we are told, one of those Godly men who spent their time in and around the Temple courts. This man, Simeon, takes the child Jesus in his arms and praises God. There is no account of fear, this strange old man appears and takes the baby in his arms, the safeguarding team would have been having hysterics by now, but Mary seems to be unperturbed, Simeon blesses the child Jesus. Simeon has recognised Jesus for who He is, for what He is. To Simeon it is the fulfilment of God's promise that he, Simeon, would not die before he sees the Lord's chosen one. Now Simeon is happy to leave this life. He offers a warning: "This child is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel." Simeon warns that Jesus will face opposition and that Mary His mother will face heartache. "A sword will pierce your own soul!" Simeon is joined by another, Anna, the prophetess who spends her time in the Temple, she too realises that this is Jesus the saviour of the world.

Simeon and Anna are people waiting for the redemption of Israel, they are both living in a world of patient hope where suffering has become a way of life. It now appears that God's appointed Redeemer will deal with this suffering by sharing it himself. Simeon speaks dark words about opposition and about a sword that will pierce Mary's heart as well. These are not words of cheer, Mary and Joseph must have been perplexed and distressed. They came to the temple to follow the custom and it would have been a time of joy, instead they face these dark warnings. Also, there is the recognition that this tiny child is the Son of God, the promised one, the Messiah. Gone is the image of a cuddly child, now we face the prospect of redemption and also division, conflict, death, and resurrection. The Messiah who will change the world encapsulated in this tiny child.

We could well look at our present situation in the world, where many of the things that we have become used to have been swept aside. Instead of peace treaties and arms limitation, we now hear of talk of rearmament, of spending more on defence, of an increasing fragile world order. We look for the time when the Kingdom of God will take control. Like Simeon and Anna, we too wait patiently in the hope of a brighter future.

"Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done."

*Christ, draw near to us,
little people, trembling and most wretched,
rowing through the infinite storm of this age;
and bring us safely to the most beautiful haven of life.*

Attributed to St Columba, from A Pilgrim's Guide to Iona Abbey

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