**Sermon at Annscroft on 31st January 2022:**

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple by The Rev’d Colin Hurford

Ps 24.7-10

Hebrews 2.14-18

Luke 2.22-40

As we heard in the Gospel reading, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple. If you would like to see a reconstruction of the Temple, then google “The temple in the time of Jesus” and you will see two videos, one quite short, which will help to illustrate the story.

I personally find the story you have just heard very encouraging - no matter how old you are, you still have something to contribute. But before thinking about that, let’s take a look at the most important people - Joseph, Mary and Jesus. There were two parts to the ceremony they attended both rooted in the Old Testament. The first was that every firstborn male should be sacrificed to God, that is, given to God. However, says the book of Numbers, the firstborn of humans you shall redeem by paying five shekels of silver to the priest. In this way, the baby Jesus is ‘bought back’ from God, as it were.

The second part of the ceremony was the purification of Mary. The Jews thought that a woman who had given birth to a baby boy was “unclean” for forty days - more time in the case of girl. There are echoes of this today in the old custom of the churching of women, changed to the thanksgiving after the birth of a child, still practiced in some churches.

The sacrifice which had to be offered was a lamb and a young pigeon but if the family was poor, this could be reduced to a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons and was known as “The offering of the poor”. Joseph was a carpenter so he would not have been desperately poor but the family would know all about the difficulties of making a living. And this was the family into which God chose to be brought up.

Now, I would like you to try and picture Joseph and Mary, Mary carrying Jesus as they entered the first part of the temple - the court of the Gentiles. This was a huge space open to everyone but very crowded and noisy, filled with people from all parts of the known world. They would probably have to push their way through the crowds to the stalls lining the entrance, many owned by Sadducees including the High priest.

You can imagine Joseph at a stall buying a couple of pigeons, maybe trying to get a good price. Then he would go to another stall to change the Roman coins into temple currency, the money changer getting his cut. Now the family would go through one of the gates leading to the court of the women - only Jewish men and women allowed in. Here it would be much quieter. There would be people praying and small groups of men and women surrounding rabbis, listening to their teaching and asking questions.

Finally, they would go up an ornate flight of steps to the court of the Israelites - no women allowed in here - and give the pigeons and money to one of the priests on duty.

Now, as they come down the steps, imagine, if you can, an old man looking around. He sees Mary and Joseph. The Holy Spirit prompts him - this is the child you have been looking for. So he goes up to the couple opening his arms “May I?” Mary puts her baby into his arms and you can see Simeon’s face light up as, holding God in his arms, he says this beautiful prayer which we call “The Nunc Dimittis”.

Perhaps you can imagine what Mary must have felt as she hears the words, “glory to my people Israel” but then, “A sword shall pierce your own soul too.” As Simeon is saying this, an old lady, Anna, comes up. She turns to the people around and says, “This is the child who is going to deliver Israel.” Some laugh at her, “you must be crazy” but others, knowing how prayerful Anna was, take her words to heart.

Let’s just think just for a moment about a few lessons from this beautiful story. First Simeon - the Holy Spirit rested upon him - how much do we need the Holy Spirit resting upon us and to experience the Spirit’s gentle prompting in our minds. Then, Simeon is not afraid of dying, indeed it looks as though he was looking forward to it. “Lord now you let your servant depart in peace.” Words that are still used by Christians throughout the world. What a legacy for an old man in Jerusalem!

Two more things. Simeon calls the baby “God’s salvation.” We use the word “Salvation” and “Saviour” often in our prayers but do we appreciate the enormity of what it actually means?  It means we can come into the very presence of God. Finally, (and we will use this picture in our prayers,) Jesus is a light for the Gentiles - for us. Jesus, a shining light in our lives.

Lastly, just a brief word about Anna. It is difficult to imagine what her circumstances would be. I wonder what must it have been like for her to lose her husband after seven years of marriage when she would still have been a young woman. But she did not give up on God. In fact she drew very close to God worshipping with fasting and prayer. I doubt any of us could come anywhere near that kind of devotion especially after such a bereavement. But she too had the gift of being able to see that this child was really special and was able to speak to others about Him.

So much in this simple but beautiful story to think about but it ends with something we simply cannot comprehend - what was it like for Jesus, Son of God, to grow up as a village boy? All we can do, like Simeon, is praise God.

Amen.

Rev’d Colin Hurford