

## **Sermon Candlemas (Cathedral)**

Well Jeanette and Michael, I feel a certain responsibility having been involved in interviewing you for your respective appointments – and I note that, disturbingly, some research has demonstrated mathematically that organisations become more efficient if they promote people at random. Not entirely at random, but once established that it was possible they could do the job, to randomly appoint. I didn't use this theory when appointing you, but why would this theory have any credibility? Because we don't realise our biased and flawed ways of seeing which cause us to appoint less on the basis of actual gifts and skills and more on whether this person oozes confidence, emotional warmth and has a certain shaped chin.

Well, maybe not the chin but unconscious bias is an ever present danger. Research in the U.S. into blind auditions for symphony members found that when musicians auditioned behind screens, women's chances of making it through the first round increased by 50% and in the final rounds by 300%. We just don't realise how biased we are in how we see things. Now in the U.S. but not the U.K., blind auditions are standard, with female player appointments increasing from 5% to 36%. In short what we see is linked to our attitudes, thoughts, feelings, wounds and longings. They are the spectacles we wear.

What do people see when baby or toddler Jesus arrives in the temple? Most people just saw another very ordinary family from the countryside, doing what countless families before and after them would do. Another baby brought into the Jerusalem temple for two reasons; the firstborn of any family was God's own, and needed to be bought back for five shekels. Second, for forty days after the birth Jesus' mother Mary was regarded as ritually unclean – and at the conclusion of those 40 days a sacrifice for her purification needed to be offered in the Temple. Richer families might offer a lamb but for families of modest means such as Jesus', a couple of pigeons had to suffice.

The Holy Family go unnoticed it seems by the religious professionals, the priests and Levites being, ironically, preoccupied with matters to do with God. But Jesus is welcomed by two people. One of them, Anna, would be just the sort of person you would tend to think was off her trolley ...like an 84 yr old lady who haunts the local cathedral, there at the door early in the morning with all her bags before it opens, and not leaving till pushed out at closing time – present at all the services, mumbling prayers and acting strangely. Dismissed perhaps as never having quite gotten over her husband's death, her eccentricity would be tolerated, but really only out of compassion for her mental state. But next time we see someone like Anna, the bag lady, we might remember that she is one of only two in the Temple who recognise the Son of God.

At Candlemas in the Church's year we stand looking back to Christmas and forward to the cross, seeing in both the appearance of God in the most surprising of ways, in a baby born in nowhere-ville on the edge of the Empire and in a man hanging immobile on a cross. God present in the strangest and most alien of places – Anna sees it - and like Anna we are to keep our eyes peeled, ready to see God present and active, not blinded by either our religious busyness or pre-conceived assumptions. Like Anna, Michael, Jeanette, in your ministries you are to be alert to the God who is hidden in plain view.

And the other person who recognises Jesus for who he is, is Simeon, a respectable and sincere believer, one of those people who can embarrass the more luke-warm among us by speaking of a God who actually acted in his life, someone waiting for

God to act again, decisively. Simeon is all the more impressive because of where he was waiting; the Jerusalem temple where, as Jesus points out later, there were some pretty rum goings on. Simeon could have turned sour, bitter, complaining about what he saw ... the years clocking up as he experienced no doubt more and more religious malpractice, hypocrisy and vice. He could have become skeptical about it all, but Simeon resists this kind of slippage and is ready, alert and present to our Lord. Quite simply, he trusts in a God who keeps his promises - Simeon has, in the power of the Spirit, rehearsed these promises, internalised them and has fostered a gratitude which purifies his heart of the impurities of cynicism.

Jeanette, Michael, you and we need to keep this inner space where we are hospitable to God; it requires of us that we rule out cluttering that inner space with bitterness, anger, slander or the like – there is a task of internal housekeeping for our hearts and minds which is critical if we are to be receptive to the God who does keep His promises and who does enter our temple. Where this internal housekeeping is not disciplined, the costs are high, including cynicism, hopelessness and apathy; but more importantly what a blessing are those where this is resisted, and the impact of those who steward their souls in ways which retain an attentiveness and openness to the divine are massive, enabling others to see, as Simeon did.

There's another unconscious bias that Candlemas challenges – the bias towards having Jesus without the Jews. The very reason the holy family are in the temple is to designate their firstborn to the Lord, rooted in Exod 13 where the Lord tells Moses that the people of God are to do this, as a reminder of God's mercy – God's freeing of Israel from her Egyptian oppressors. The Holy family turn up because of this story, of God's engagement with Israel, it is the story Simeon and Anna are schooled, and out of this story they recognise Jesus. Yet they had no New Testament to go on, no sacraments, no alpha course even. Schooled by the hope of Israel & the work of God's Spirit, Simeon and Anna are able to see that our salvation is wrapped up in this baby.

They do not and perhaps cannot articulate this, at least not in the ways that we find later in the New Testament. Nevertheless Simeon does grasp that in Jesus he is seeing salvation. He also grasps that this God-baby's way of salvation is profoundly disturbing, pointing out to Mary, that God's advent in Jesus does not invite a naïve belief that what now follows is living happily ever after. On the contrary, the God who saves by becoming one of us is the God who refuses to indulge our illusions that putting things right and reconciling us is done by control, manipulation and violence. Not a bit of it - rather as a baby and on the cross, Jesus, utterly defenceless to the world's fearsome exercise of control manipulation and violence exposes our fantasies about such things. Recognising salvation in this God-baby means admitting to ourselves this is not the kind of salvation we desire.

Jeanette, Michael, you will be tempted in your ministries not to see salvation in such unpromising a picture as this and not to operate from it – you will be tempted rather to operate as outcome generators, as episcopal and ecclesial managers, as subtle or not so subtle directors of operations. Remember when the institution asks this of you, remember when the institution requires this of you, remember when the institution rewards you for this, remember to train your eyes again on the child in the temple and the man on the cross – and to appreciate that finally you have no ministry – you have no ministry to talk of – you only have a ministry to share in, namely the ministry of this baby, from cradle to cross.

Let us pray; Lord make us like Anna, present to you, the God hidden in plain view, make us like Simeon, those maintaining an inner space hospitable to you, and make

us like your saints in light, those sharing in the only ministry which matters, that of the Word made flesh, our crucified Lord.