

Candlemas 2nd Feb 2025

When the artist Rembrandt was a young man, just 25 years old, he painted a picture of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (printed at back of church). Rembrandt made the backdrop huge, a great sweeping stone staircase, arches vaulting up into darkness, a massive, cavernous holy place. And cutting diagonally down through the darkness was a shaft of light which illuminated the four central characters: Mary, the Christ-child, Simeon and Joseph, dwarfed by the magnificence of their surroundings. It's a great theatrical painting. The original is in the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

But when Rembrandt was an old man, nearly forty years on, in fact just a few days before he died, he tackled this subject again. This time no Temple, no vastness, no exterior spotlight. The deep shadows were still there, but now all that we have is Simeon, his arms outstretched, and resting across his arms a tiny, swaddled child. Simeon is an old, old man, suffused with a gentle light, his grey and wispy beard, and his deep sunken eyes just visible. Rembrandt had abandoned the drama of his youth and the grand, theatrical gesture, and has brought all his force to bear on the contrast between old life and new, the end and the beginning. The experience he had accrued had altered Rembrandt's perception of where truth, wisdom and beauty was to be found.

It was the poet Victor Hugo who wrote that 'there is a flame in the eyes of the young, but light in the eyes of the old'. It's a sentiment that seems to leap off the page in the scene St Luke describes. Simeon speaks just two sentences. He is not one to waste his words. Perhaps you have experienced the wisdom of someone elderly and close to death in what they have said to you. They are encounters that can live long in the memory. Simeon's poem is offered at funerals and sung or said throughout the land every day at evensong or evening prayer; *'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel'*.

In the finale of the BBC show *The Traitors* much was made of the role of The Seer – it rather skewed the ending and, I think, drew out a greater degree of selfishness than might have otherwise been the case from the players (I better not spoil the outcome). But Simeon is, if you like, the old and true seer. He is righteous and devout. The Holy Spirit is resting upon him. He will not see death before he sees the Lord. He has been waiting and hoping and praying for this moment all of his days. This encounter is a fulfilment.

The sins of Israel had, according to the prophet Ezekiel, caused the glory of the Lord to depart from the Temple. Therefore one of the deepest aspirations of Israel was to reestablish the Temple as the place of right praise, so that the glory of the Lord might return. When Joseph and Mary bring the infant Jesus into this place, we are meant to appreciate that the prophecy of Ezekiel is being fulfilled. God is returning to his dwelling place. And this is what Simeon – a true faithful – sees and declares. He is a symbol of the ancient Israel, watching and waiting for the coming Messiah. He knew all of the old prophecies. He embodies the expectation of the nation.

And with his ripening years, he gives us that gift of perspective. The whole arc of salvation history. Because Candlemas is not just the moment of realisation that the Saviour is here. It is the moment at which the Saviour's course is set out for us. It is the moment when our attention begins to turn. From the Crib to the Cross. His words 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'*. The words of another poet, William Blake, come to mind... *'Joy and woe and woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine'*. I think our appreciation of that sentiment is only something that grows with age.

The Crib and the Cross. Young and old. Light and dark. New life and death. Joy and sorrow – this scene has it all, a dream for an artist. Perhaps no surprise that St Luke became the patron saint of artists. Simeon's words of praise are tempered by those words to Mary that point towards the suffering that will come. His prophecy gives meaning to the words of Christmas night - *'the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not'*.

One of the jobs yesterday was to sort out the candles for this service. They are same candles we used at our carol service just a few weeks ago. At Christmas they symbolise for us the light that is coming into the world. At Candlemas they remind us we are to be bearers of that light. We're to hold onto that light even when that is hard, painful, frightening or frustrating. If you've followed more of the awful headlines associated with the Church of England this week, you will know that being a part of this church can be all those things. We are called to live lives that give space to that light, that allow it to shine in our words and deeds and so make it visible to others. The elderly Simeon lived to welcome the light and his hopes were fulfilled. May we be bearers of that same light through all our years as we journey towards the Cross.