

The gift of hope

Rt Revd Matthew Parker's sermon for 31 January 2020

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, Candlemas

The novelist Vikram Seth on Desert Island Discs chose as one of his top discs a poignant recording made during the war by a BBC sound engineer. The engineer was capturing the song of nightingales in a Surrey garden but, whilst recording, a hundred and ninety seven Lancaster bombers passed overhead en route to a bombing raid in Germany. In the recording you can hear the joyful song of the nightingale and then, underneath and growing in intensity and threatening to overwhelm the birdsong, the ominous drone of the bombers. Seth spoke of the "heartbreaking counterpoint of joy and pain".

(www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/magazine-35874257)

In the gospel story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple we have just such a heartbreaking counterpoint of joy and sorrow. Here we see so much that is good and beautiful.

There is a new life represented in this child only days old. Here is extraordinary hope and anticipation.

We have the pride of grateful parents, their joy in this child who has been brought to birth, unique, theirs, and yet a gift from God.

Here is great faith and devotion too. Simeon and Anna are watching and waiting for God to bring consolation and redemption to Israel. How easy it would be for them to become disillusioned or distracted in their waiting. But they stick with it because they believe that God is good and loves Israel and will act for them.

And there is a blessing given to the baby Jesus by the elderly Simeon; the insight that this little child will bring light not only to waiting Israel but to all the nations of the earth. The Spirit of God is at work in Anna and Simeon and hovers over this child and his parents. In God's temple, God's Spirit bears witness to God's son.

Life is glorious and to be celebrated. Nightingales sing! There is love, joy, faithfulness, gratitude, new discoveries and the knowledge that we are in the presence of a loving God.

But this story of Jesus presented in the temple is a bittersweet story; there is a darker note to be heard, a counterpoint. Because when we look at all these characters, we sense their vulnerability, their frailty. What, after all, is more helpless and fragile than a baby?

And what of his parents? What is poor old Joseph to make of this strange birth? And Mary? Does the taint of disgrace still hang around her and her newborn child? The circumstances of Jesus' birth were, after all, let's say, unusual. It's all a bit messy and unsatisfactory, not quite the perfect family as seen on TV advertising, more like our families, more like our experience of that life is actually like.

And Simeon and Anna carry their own vulnerabilities too. Anna's husband died seven years into their marriage. For the greater part of her life she has been widowed and, as a widow in those times, lives a precarious existence dependent on the charity of her male relatives.

And Simeon, waiting and waiting and waiting, must have had his moments of doubt and disappointment. Sometimes he must've hoped against hope and trusted through gritted teeth that God would console Israel.

Because Simeon and Anna carry not only their own struggles, doubts and the infirmities of old age but also the sadness of their people. Simeon, we are told, is waiting for the consolation of Israel. If Israel needs consoling then Israel is living in a time of mourning and sadness. It was hard for pious and faithful people to see their nation, God's chosen people, under the oppression of the Gentile nations.

Anna, we are told, is looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem needs redeeming it is because Jerusalem is not free. Anna and Simeon are full of hope and expectation for Israel but they also mourn its captivity.

So into such a world - in all its glory and all its fragility - comes Jesus, the Lord's Christ, the glory of his people Israel and the light that will lighten the Gentiles. And how does he come? Does he come as the divine fixer who will bypass all that complicated and messy human emotion and experience? What is revealed is that, rather than sidestepping the muddle of human life, in Jesus, God chooses to dive straight down into it. So here is a great mystery: the God who made the world now enters into that world and submits to all its glory and fragility.

Simeon blesses Jesus but...

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.

This is not what a mother wants to hear about her baby. She doesn't want to hear that he will be spoken against. She doesn't want talk of swords that pierce the heart. But in order to redeem our suffering, God enters into our suffering. There is great light in this Candlemas story but there is shadow too and by far the greatest shadow is cast by the shape of a cross.

We can hear, so to speak, the nightingale song and the drone of Lancaster bombers. And this light and the shade cannot –in this world, at least - be separated out, as much as we might wish it to be so.

I don't need to labour the point. In the past year we have seen something of the glory of human life in the selfless work of frontline workers of all kinds, the brilliance of scientists in creating a vaccine and in countless moments of human kindness and neighbourliness. But we have also heard the threatening rumble of suffering and death. We have seen - in hospital wards, lost jobs, lost school days, mental health problems and widening divisions between rich and poor - the heartbreaking fragility of human life. We have all been touched by this crisis but for some of us this will have come painfully close to our homes and families.

In a world of sorrow and oppression, there is much we can do as Christians – there are actions we can take. Run foodbanks, setup telephone helplines, lead online worship, get the shopping for a shielding neighbour and so on. All really good things to do but, like Simeon and Anna, we must also carry in our hearts the fragility of the world, waiting and praying for its consolation and redemption. This is the world into which Jesus was born and, in fellowship with him and with all who suffer and mourn, we pray, longing and waiting for the greater dawning of his Kingdom in a world of shadow and suffering.

And as we faithfully bear witness in this way to the sorrow of the world, we also bear faithful witness to the one who has come amongst us, whose presence is a "light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel". In this fragile little child, Anna and Simeon see salvation – one greater even than a much needed vaccination! They see not only the piercing sword, the falling and rising, the rumble of the engines of war overhead, the stealthy spread of a deadly disease, they see salvation, God's choice is not only to share with us in the mess but also to redeem it.

As we hold together the counterpoint of joy and pain, may God give us the faith to live as those who look for consolation and redemption in these dark times. May God give us grace to stand and wait in fellowship with Jesus and all those who endure the pain of the world. And then may God give us the gift of hope in the One who is coming into the world, the light who will lighten the nations.

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