

Revealing the thoughts of our hearts

A Candlemass meditation on Luke 2: 22-38

Last Tuesday, 2nd February, was an important date in the Christian calendar of festivals: it was Candlemass!

The name Candlemass comes from the church tradition of blessing the candles that will burn throughout the coming year. As the winter days remain cold and short and as we yearn for the longer, brighter days of Spring, it is a moment to celebrate Jesus, the Light of the World.

Candlemass is celebrated exactly 40 days after Christmas. It marks the time when Mary, Joseph and Jesus came to the temple 40 days after the birth, in accordance with the Jewish law and customs.

I thought it was therefore appropriate for us to reflect on this Bible passage today. As we bask in the light of these candles, I pray the words of Simeon, that we would also see God's salvation, glory and revelation.

Let me take you back in time to the place where it happened. The scene is Jerusalem. Busy people are going about their normal lives: buying groceries, trading, visiting relatives. A small family of three has just arrived in the city, heading for the temple along with many others.

Mary and Joseph are following the instructions originally given to Moses that any first-born child must be consecrated to God (Exodus 13:2). And they are also adhering to the law of the Lord concerning the purification of a woman after she has given birth: they must sacrifice a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering (Leviticus 12).

They stop at the traders stalls to buy the animals required for the offerings. But the money they have is not enough to buy a lamb, so instead they purchase what is legally allowable for poorer folk: just two pigeons (Lev 12: 8).

Meanwhile, a local man called Simeon has sensed God's Spirit stirring in him. He remembers the promise he had received from God that he wouldn't die before seeing the Christ. Excitedly, Simeon walks quickly to the temple, and awaits the longed-for encounter...

At the same time, the prophetess Anna walks into the temple courtyard. In the distance, she notices the devout man called Simeon bouncing on the balls of his feet, his gaze fixed on the doorway, eyes darting back and forth at the streams of people coming in. Suddenly, something captures his attention. His feet are now still. His body straightens. His face beams. And he strides off towards a young woman holding her baby. Opening his arms wide in welcome, he tenderly lifts the baby from the hold of the astonished mother and cradles him closely in his arms. Words of blessing and relief and thankfulness flow from his mouth as his eyes take in the child's face:

"Now, Lord, I can die in peace, as you promised me. For my eyes have seen Your salvation: he is a light for revelation for the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

The child's parents are amazed at what they hear. Can these words be true?

Turning to them, Simeon casts his eyes on the bewildered Mary and Joseph and blesses them too. But he has more truth to share, important words on the tip of his tongue, placed there by the Spirit, that he must speak.

Turning directly to Mary, he says to her:

“This child will cause both the fall and the recovery of many in Israel. He will be a sign that is misunderstood and contradicted. And a sword will pierce your own soul, so that the thoughts from many other hearts will be revealed.”

Mary’s gaze shifts from Simeon down to the eyes of her child. And she quickly recalls the response she had given the angel some ten months ago: “Let it be to me according to your word”.

Mary’s anguish and her desperate attempt to cling on to some hope of a brighter future are somehow calmed as she becomes aware of a new noise in the temple. The quiet but confident sound of someone singing. Its just one voice. She looks around to see where it is coming from. The sound is mesmerizing, beautiful, soothing. And she can feel that tiny seed of hope embed solidly within her. And there is Anna, elderly in posture but vibrant in faith, praising and praying her thanks to God.

We leave the scene, exit the temple, depart Jerusalem, and find ourselves here in our seats in Peace Church in February 2021.

We know the story of this Christ child. How, as a man, he returned to that same temple and drove out the money changers and livestock sellers. The animals were scattered and everyone was in uproar. He may have spoken to the very same people who sold the pigeons to his parents all those years ago, saying to them “Take these things away! Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade” (John 2: 16). It was over: the system of paying for blessings and buying purity was no longer needed.

Jesus’ message and his actions contradicted many of the age-old customs. He highlighted the hypocrisy of the powerful, and he raised up those who had been stamped down. As Simeon had prophesied, he was a misunderstood figure, he was a sign that was spoken against and opposed. He was rejected by many.

But the words that intrigue me most of all are the words of Simeon’s address to Mary in verse 35:

“a sword will pierce your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

or as The Message puts it: *the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.*

To me, this message that was delivered to Mary is a timeless message that we can hear too.

Mary loved her child very much, and she suffered very much too. Many artistic depictions of Mary show her as a woman of sorrow, sometimes with a dagger stuck in her heart, or with seven swords piercing a heart that bleeds. Mary’s heart must have broken when she cradled the body of her crucified adult son. When you love someone deeply, you will probably suffer at some point too.

“The sword will pierce your heart, and the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” (v 35)

But this heartbreak has some consequence: something is revealed in *other* people.

Mary is an example of the truly broken-hearted. As we reflect on Mary's suffering, something inside us can connect with her experience and her emotions, and the thoughts of our own hearts are revealed. And so through Mary's agony, many people have come to cling onto Christ in their own sorrows and suffering, and to know Jesus Christ as saviour.

Simeon's words can also be a lesson for us too. It often takes one brave person to open up and share something of their pain or grief or suffering that then encourages others to reveal their own honest feelings and struggles. If we all just appear nice and 'sorted', then our interactions don't go very deep. A broken-hearted person sharing their pain can bless others by enabling others to also humbly reveal and share something honest and real.

I have certainly found that when I have been open about my heart-aches and struggles, I have been amazed by how others have opened up in response and shared something of their story with me. And we are then both blessed by realising we are not alone.

We are living in a time of much heart-break, suffering and struggles. And I believe this pandemic and the various challenges we are facing are revealing much about what is really under the surface of our lives and also our societies. The wounding reveals something.

And so I'd like to lead us in some questions, for self-reflection and prayer:

The suffering of this present time is revealing something.

What is it revealing about the Earth?

What is it revealing about our systems of government?

What is it revealing about our human strengths and values?

What is it revealing about our prejudices and short-sightedness?

What is it revealing about the thoughts of our hearts?

What is it revealing about who we really are?

I will pray to close:

God, we join our prayers with Simeon and Anna and say "our eyes have seen your salvation". We thank you for Jesus and all that he revealed about you, God, and your kingdom. We thank you for Mary and all that she teaches us through her faith, love and sorrow. We pray that you would sustain us through this pandemic. But we also ask that this suffering would reveal much to us about ourselves and our world for which we can then seek healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, peace and justice... for your glory. Amen