

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Holy God, who has given us the gospel of Jesus Christ; grant us, we pray You, that we may live with the gospel in our heart, to meditate upon it, and seek it; and that those who seek, find. Help us to learn on earth those things which shall abide in heaven. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In his letter to the Galatians, St Paul says that Jesus was born under the law. In the Gospel of Luke, following the birth and circumcision of Jesus, we are told that the days of Mary's purification according to the law of Moses were completed and she, together with Joseph, took the Child to the temple to dedicate Him to God. In the faith narrative of Mary conceiving and bearing a Child, in her song, the *Magnificat*, and in her presentation of her Child in the temple, we have a Jewish *midrash* story of the Old Testament story of Hannah conceiving, bearing a child, Samuel, and presenting him in the temple. Mary's *Magnificat* is very similar to Hannah's prayer. Hannah said:

The LORD kills and makes alive;
He brings down to the grave and brings up.
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
He brings low and lifts up.
He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the beggar from the ash heap,
To make them inherit the throne of glory.

Jesus was born under the law and, like Samuel, as the firstborn, He was dedicated to God. The 2nd of February (or the nearest Sunday) is the day on which the Church marks the Presentation of the Lord in the temple. In the church calendar, today marks the end of the Christmas cycle and, in some traditions, candles are blessed for liturgical use, candles being a symbol that Jesus is the light of the world, a light of revelation to the Gentiles; hence the term *Candlemas*.

Some weeks ago, in preparation for today, I used this passage from the Gospel of Luke as the basis of a meditation or, if you prefer the term, imaginative prayer. Imaginative prayer involves stilling oneself, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Imaginative prayer involves stillness of the whole person and gently bringing oneself into the silent Presence of God. Many stories in the Bible, including the New Testament, are open to a meditative or spiritual interpretation or, arguably, are best interpreted in this way. With eyes closed, in the physical darkness of imaginative prayer, we carefully enter the scene of the text. We see Mary and Joseph arriving at the Temple with Jesus. In the mind's eye, we see the old man, Simeon, to whom it had been revealed that death would not come until he had seen the Lord's Christ, the Consolation of Israel. The parents brought the Child to Jesus. Simeon took Him up in his arms and blessed God. He spoke the words that we know as the *Nunc Dimittis*:

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;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles
And to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Simeon blessed the parents who marvelled at his words. Simeon said to Mary, ‘Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel...and yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also...’ Finally, before leaving the temple, we meet Anna, the prophetess. Anna had lived in the temple for over eighty years after her husband’s death and she fasted and prayed. On this day, she gave thanks to the Lord for Jesus.

For me, this passage speaks first of journey, of pilgrimage. Mary and Joseph travelled to the temple. They had to prepare for that journey and their purpose was to bring themselves into the Presence of God and seek His blessing upon their Child. As my wife and I have done, parents bring their children to this sanctuary that through the water of baptism God may touch and bless the child they love. Perhaps the most heart-stopping moment in this passage is not the words of Simeon but his action. He held Christ in his arms. He embraced God. Here God is vulnerable, in the hands of His parents and in the arms of Simeon. God places Himself in this world in need of our care, tenderness and love. Crucially, Simeon embraces Jesus. On my faith journey, in my life, the importance of pilgrimage, of intentionally journeying inward and of seeking

God in so-called ‘thin places’, places where the Spirit seems imperceptibly nearer, the faith narrative of Mary and Joseph journeying to the temple, the home of God, His seat of mercy, immediately resonates. Here in this story we have a metaphor for our life and calling: to embrace Jesus. In prayer, meditation, in worship and social action: intentionally, actively, consciously embrace Jesus. At its best, the sole purpose of the Church is to empower people, enable people, enlighten people, that they will for themselves embrace Jesus. This spiritual intimacy with the Holy in and through the Person of Jesus is the one thing the Church offers the world that no other community or organisation seeks to do.

The story of Anna is the story of God bringing spiritual life, life that is the most real, into the life of a woman who dedicated almost her entire life to God. In the barrenness of her material and worldly existence, Anna faithfully praised God, waited decades for God. In her life, she encountered the spiritual, the Holy, was touched by the nearness of God, satisfied by the fulfilment of His promise to bring life, and had her life transfigured and transformed. With the eyes of faith, like Anna, we can see the nearness of God, we can see Him in all things and we can perceive that the spiritual and not the material is the most real.

Within the Celtic tradition of Christianity, John, so-called, the writer of the Fourth Gospel, was referred to as John of Love or the disciple whom Jesus loved especially. At the Last Supper, it is John who leans against Jesus and, in the Celtic tradition, it is said that he heard the heartbeat of God. In this life, on our individual journey, through public worship, the reading of Scripture, prayer, meditation and social action, we have the opportunity to still ourselves that in the cosmos and in the fine point of our soul we may hear, however faintly, the heartbeat of God. This is what the Church is about and this is the spiritual treasure it has to share. I often feel that so many of the doctrines of the institutional churches are, at times, little more than obstacles on that pilgrimage. When St Paul first encountered the mystical Presence of Jesus, when the scales fell from his eyes, there were no creedal statements from the councils at Nicaea, Chalcedon or Ephesus and there world had never heard of Augustine, Calvin or Barth. The stories of Mary and Joseph, Simeon, Anna and Paul are encounters with the Holy, of frightening intimacy with God in Jesus, and, however helpful the great theologies of the churches may be, embracing Christ, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, is this life's treasure.

In the nineteenth century, an Edinburgh man called Alexander Carmichael began to record the prayers of the people of the Hebrides and the west of Scotland that had been passed down for centuries. The collection is called *Carmina Gadelica*, which means 'the songs and poems of the Gaels.' These

prayers and poems powerfully show that our spiritual forebears believed that God was the life of creation, was alive within creation, though also distinct from it. Our Celtic forebears had a receptivity for the Presence, the Presence of the Holy in the secular, the spiritual in the material. In one poetic prayer, worshippers gave thanks for the sun, for the material gift of light and heat, while, at the same time, being fully aware of the spiritual light of God within creation:

The eye of the great God,
The eye of the God of glory,
The eye of the King of hosts,
The eye of the King of the living,
Pouring upon us
At each time and season,
Pouring upon us
Gently and generously.
Glory to thee,
Thou glorious sun.
Glory to thee, thou sun,
Face of the God of life.

In this life, on our spiritual journey, we have the opportunity to make intentional steps inwards and to step out on pilgrimage. Our destination, as for Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna, is intimacy with God, the embrace of Jesus and the turning around and transformation of our life. The more time we consciously endeavour to spend in the company of Jesus the more receptive we will be to the Presence all around us and within.

One old woman told Alexander Carmichael that from her youth she had been told to pray constantly and to see her prayer as a joining of her heart and voice to creation's unending song. She said:

My mother would be asking us to sing our morning song to God down in the back-house, as Mary's lark was singing it up in the clouds, and as Christ's mavis (or song thrush) was singing it yonder in the tree, giving glory to the God of the creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day, and for the joy of life. She would tell us that every creature on earth here below and in the ocean beneath and in the air above was giving glory to the great God of the creatures and the worlds, of the virtues and the blessings, and would *we* be dumb?

The Augustinian-Calvinist theology of the Reformation taught us that creation is fallen, that God is not in creation and that we are full of sin, God is not in us. In the nineteenth century, a minister of the Church of Scotland was deposed by the General Assembly for daring to suggest that God was in all life and that God's essence was at the heart of life. The General Assembly said that God and His world were separate and only His elect were loved by Him. Sadly that theology lingers on, but it is wrong. Like Simeon and Anna, with the eyes of faith, we can see and hear the heartbeat of God in the cosmos, in Scripture and in the deepest part of ourselves. God loves us, is attracted to us and invites us to be intimate with Him. In a sense, the story of creation is a love story, *the* love story.

Amen.