

Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Carol Elsasser, 31 Jan 21

This account of Jesus being brought to Jerusalem to the temple by his parents is one of just a few stories about Jesus's childhood in the Gospels. The scarcity of these insights reminds us that they must have been included for a significant reason.

Luke is reminding his readers that Jesus was born a Jew and came under the Law of Moses.

In obedience to the law Mary had to present herself to be purified 40 days after the birth of her child and as parents they were meant to set aside their firstborn for the Lord - although this did not have to be done in the temple.

Interestingly the offering they make is a pair of doves and this is the offering that was permitted in Law by those who were poor – the usual offering would have been a year old lamb and a dove. By highlighting this Luke is reminding us that Jesus can relate to all people as he has humble beginnings.

The passage then turns to two older people, both prophets, and one of each sex, who modelled watching and waiting and then bear witness to God's plan for this special baby to all those around that through his birth God's promises are moving into realisation.

Firstly we meet Simeon, a righteous and devout Jew, and we learn that he was an extraordinary man who heard from God and was filled with the Holy Spirit – putting this into context – at that time there had been no recorded acts of God or prophets since Malachi 400 years earlier.

We don't know how old Simeon was but we assume that he had already lived longer than average as the Spirit had told him he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. And that day when he came to the temple he had been led there by the Spirit.

Luke records Simeon's words in detail – and these have become known as the *Nunc dimittis* which in Latin is roughly "now thou lettest depart" and since the 4th and 5th century have been regularly used at evening prayers or compline at the close of the day and at funerals as they imply fulfilment, peace and rest even in the face of death – "Lord.... you may now dismiss your servant in peace".

What Simeon goes on to say is quite similar to the words spoken about the baby Jesus by the angels who visited the shepherds – bringing great joy for the people of Israel. However Simeon goes still further saying that the child will bring salvation for **all** peoples – the whole world.

Simeon's words illustrate that Jesus as the light has two roles – he is revelation for the Gentiles – opening a way of salvation that was not known to them before Jesus's arrival.

And for Israel – Jesus is described as the glory – as he is realising the promises made by God to the people of Israel.

Promises made over 2000 years earlier to Abraham in Genesis (Chapter 12 v 3) that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. And Isaiah who had prophesied (Chapter 49 v 6) I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. Now Simeon was proclaiming that these promises were fulfilled in the person of this child.

Simeon then went on to speak just to Mary – and some speculate that this is because Joseph would die before Jesus began his ministry and thus be spared seeing his son rejected by those he came to save. Simeon gives a note of foreboding that all will not be well and Jesus will divide the nation and his offer of salvation won't be taken up by everyone, as some will stumble and some will oppose it – he refers to the sword piercing Mary's heart as a mother watches her son suffer such rejection and ultimately death on the cross.

Luke then introduces us to Anna – like Simeon she is devout, old and a prophet, never leaving the temple but worshipping and praying there night and day. A faithful woman of God in her 84th year.

We are not told her exact words but like Simeon she recognised that this child was the Messiah and gave thanks to God and spoke about him to everyone who would listen. She proclaimed that he had come to rescue his people and restore God's reign to Jerusalem.

As I'm sure you know I do like to find out the context of things and at that time men and women were segregated within the temple so her message would have reached other women. Thereby Luke is showing us that through Simeon and Anna all Jewish people of both sexes had the opportunity to hear that the Messiah had arrived.

In our current world of instant gratifications - lack of patience to wait for anything - same day delivery - etc both Simeon and Anna serve as reminders that God works to his own time frame – and when our hopes and dreams don't come true instantly we need to pray for patience to remember just that and to wait on God.

Simeon and Anna declare that Jesus is the light who came into the world to dispel sin and darkness. And for this reason traditionally candles have been blessed on this day to commemorate the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the day has become known as Candlemass.

Jesus is the light of the world, the light of our lives – he wants to shine that light into all the dark parts of our lives and transform them for good.

Amen