

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

Candlemas 2025

Many times bigger even than this church, the Jerusalem Temple stood impressively, maybe even a bit forbiddingly, in that holiest of cities. If you go there now there is virtually nothing left: it was destroyed by the Romans really not very long after the time of Jesus. But you can see the footprint, and you can imagine its great grandeur.

Into this vast building, thronging with people, noisy with many languages, the air thick with the odours of incense and animals and blood sacrifice, into all this maelstrom comes the little refugee group, Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

They are there for two ritual reasons, and being faithful people, they have dared to go to the big city and do their duty. With Herod's rage rather fresh in their minds, we can imagine their nervousness. But under the Law the firstborn male had to be consecrated to God; and Mary had to be purified after birth, by bringing a sacrifice. Being poor, they were allowed to bring just two pigeons.

If you visit a great cathedral now and want to speak to a priest – for prayer, or a blessing, or counsel or confession – you will usually find yourself in a little side chapel with a duty priest: someone quite junior in rank, though probably of some age. More often than not, glad to say, that priest will be as wise and encouraging as he or she is apparently unimportant, in the midst of all the grandeur.

So it is for Mary and Joseph. They find Simeon. And their daring commitment to their ritual obligations is rewarded in a way they could never have expected. They are given another glimpse into what Jesus means – not just for them, but for the world, the whole world. 'A revealing light to the peoples of the world, glory for the people of Israel.'

Those who built that gargantuan Temple and those who ran it – and, no doubt, most of the pilgrims there – all had a hope of the saving of the Jewish people by a Messiah, a Lord who would suddenly come to his Temple like a refining fire. Their ancient prophet Malachi had foreseen it.

But they miss it. The prophecy is fulfilled on the edge of the crowd, barely noticed. God is borne into the midst of his temple shrouded in poor ordinariness. And an ordinary old priest, who had been given an extraordinary insight, is rewarded with the encounter he was promised. 'Here is salvation', he can say; 'now I can die'.

What we are doing here, now, is another small huddle on the edge of a big busy crowded scene. The big wide world is not looking in our direction; if any do catch a glimpse, they probably think 'oh, what funny little carryings-on'.

We are the side-show now in a world whose attention has turned from God; or whose attention to God has been warped out of true. But as Simeon recognised then, so now we have to recognise that Jesus is here: the light that reveals God to the whole world.

Jesus comes to us in our ordinariness, as he once was, and gives us the extraordinary privilege of bearing him in our hearts and in our words and in our actions out beyond this holy hour into the rest of our lives.

And we don't do this alone. We do it as members of a body, his Body, the Church. The Church into which most or all of us here have been baptised.

At the west end of St Paul's Cathedral there are two big votive candle stands. One little candle in that vast space would struggle to make a difference. But by the end of the day the stands are aglow with many, many candles, which glitter and can be seen right from the distant east end.

What we do here, and what we do every other minute of our lives, when done with the light of Jesus burning visibly in us, is really noticeable when we do it as a body of people. The light put in us at our baptism, the light replenished in this Eucharist, can bring a warmth and brightness to a world which needs it as much as ever.

So let us nurture that light in each other, encourage it to flame out into a world where the Spirit is – already there! - waiting to fire us up and fire us on.