

Candlemas – 30th January 2022

The important things in our lives often start in insignificant, ordinary ways; the first meeting with the person we will marry; the book which introduces us to a subject which will become a passion; a friendship which changes our life; a positive pregnancy test – or tragically a positive covid test.

I like the story of Max Woosey the twelve year old given a tent by an elderly neighbour dying of cancer who challenged Max, 'Have an adventure with it.' He has slept out in the tent ever since – for nearly 2 years, has raised almost £680,000 in sponsorship for a hospice and was awarded the British Empire medal in the New Year honours list. But it started one night with a boy sleeping out his garden.

There is something 'ordinary' about the Presentation in the Temple. 'As was the custom,' Mary and Joseph brought the child to the temple and they also brought a gift of two doves in thanksgiving. The gift was an acknowledgement that the child was from God. The custom was rooted in the Jewish reaction to the older pagan tradition of child sacrifice. God had made clear to the Jews that was abhorrent to him. The doves were a 'redeeming sacrifice,' instead of the sacrifice of the child; a reminder that God is a God of love, not death and vengeance.

Sometimes, as well as the redeeming sacrifice of the doves, the child would be consecrated in God's service. You may remember the story of Samuel's mother Hannah. Long before Jesus was brought to the temple he had prayed for a baby so urgently that the temple priest accused her of being drunk. She wasn't. Her prayer was granted and in due course she gave birth to Samuel. Once he was weaned Hannah brought him to the temple to be trained as a temple priest and prophet.

There is perhaps something of this in our Christian custom of child baptism. The child is brought to church by parents and godparents. Promises are made on their behalf that they will grow up as a child of God. It is a celebration of thanksgiving and a consecration of the child to God.

The presentation of Christ in the temple was also a further revelation of who he was. It was witnessed by two significant people. One was Simeon, for whom the presentation represented the fulfilment of a life of waiting and the completion of his task – and his life. He recognised that Mary and Joseph, an apparently insignificant couple with their baby, were in fact bringing into the temple the salvation of Israel. More than that, he would also be the revelation of God for the Gentiles. All that in a six week old baby. With his long life of waiting now complete he accepted his life would soon be over.

But for Anna, the recognition of Christ in the temple was a new beginning – the sign that that the time of Israel's redemption had arrived and a new era was beginning. She knew the tiny, fragile life would change history, would redeem not one or two lives but the whole of God's people for ever. In the light of Christ's ministry and resurrection our horizon of the redeemed isn't limited to one race or nation but reaches to all people of all times, everywhere.

In celebration of the light of Christ shining throughout the world, the early church blessed candles on the feast of the Presentation. I suppose a modern analogy would be for us all to bring our desk lamps to be blessed. I don't propose we do that! But at the end of the service we will light candles to remind us of Christ as the light of the world and to celebrate that we, the living church today, are the 'Gentiles' to whom the light of Christ has reached.

Later, as we leave church we can imagine ourselves as sparks of that light tossed out of the church to light up the world. We go out to a variety of challenges. This week some of you will be at work; some at school; some will be volunteering in the community pantry; Kara will be leading worship in St Andrew's School. I will be meeting with a bereaved family to plan a funeral. Wherever we are and whatever we do in all our activities and actions, we – as baptised Christians – are sparks of the light of Christ which Simeon recognised.

So at the end of today's service, feel free to keep your candle to remind you that even if your baptism was now long ago, perhaps not even something you can remember, from that ordinary beginning each one of us is a precious spark of the light of Christ in the world.