

Christmas 1  
1/01/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 61: 10 - 63: 3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4: 4 - 7

Luke 2: 22 - 40

**The fulfilment has come...**

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A Catholic Priest introduced two extra rituals to the Baptism liturgy in his church. During the ceremony it was the custom to invite a senior member of the congregation to come and lay hands on the child as a sign of passing on the traditions and visions of faith. And at the end of the service the parents were invited to share their dreams for their child. Both of these were challenging. The richness of having a senior member “pass on” the tradition to the youngest member is very powerful. And to have a family speak about their hopes for their child would be a point of great vulnerability. There would be things you would hardly dare to think, let alone say. And then how would you cope with the unfolding of a life that did not fit the vision. Most parents know what it costs to allow a child to grow up in a way that is true to their character and life, free of heavy messages laid on them by others.

The picture on our Order of Service for the day is of the child Jesus being presented in the Temple. Mary is handing him to Simeon as in the scene Luke portrays in our reading today.

1. Mary and Joseph were a faithful, observant but poor family who lived their life according to the traditions of Israel. Luke’s message is that whoever Jesus is, he is not something grafted onto a tradition. The incarnation took place in real history: Augustus was Emperor, Quirinius Governor, and the family’s frequenting of the Temple shows that **Jesus comes from a faithful family of Israel**. His parents observe the key practices of their religion; they circumcise their son, his mother is purified, Jesus is dedicated, and they make the annual pilgrimage for the Passover. As Christians we should never forget that Jesus was a man of Middle-Eastern appearance who came from an observant family. This is our heritage and we have a special relation to these traditions and the people who keep them. We know that later on debates arose as to how much of the Jewish Law had to be kept by Christians, but here we see that Christians are the successors of the Biblical faith.

2. The core of the story is where Jesus is honoured by Simeon and Anna. They were saints of Israel, prophets who were moved by the Spirit and were open to rich sources of Holy Wisdom. They had spent their lives around the Temple hoping for the holy one of God to appear. Their prayer and dedication of purpose meant that they were ready and the event did not pass them by. We don’t know why they chose this life of dedication. Perhaps, in the case of Anna, we can see that other things may have disappointed her, and in compensation, she committed herself to God. We don’t hear much about her, but she recognised the promised one in the arms of Mary and Joseph, and she looked into the face of him in whom everything she had longed for would be fulfilled.

We hear a bit more about Simeon. He takes Jesus in his arms, looks into his eyes, and utters the words that are grounded in the hope of the prophets. For hundreds of years these have been included in the service of evening prayer of churches throughout the world:

Master, now let your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.

The prophets declared God's decision was to dwell with us and Simeon was ready to go to his rest, knowing he held in his arms the one in whom God was already making this come true. He looked into the eyes through which God looked on the world in love. Fulfilment for Simeon was something tangible to be embraced and blessed. The beautiful words he uses show us that what Jesus brought was not for one race, or for a special caste - it was for all the world to share. This was God's child for all people.

3. The biblical sense of fulfilment that is found here can be equated with the words of the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come." The consolation of Israel would be the establishment of the reign of God. This would affect all people. It would be good news to the poor in spirit of every land, the light that would shine to enlighten the Gentiles. What Simeon and Anna saw and hailed was the child who was to become a blessing as once Abraham had been called by God to be a means of blessing the whole world.

4. Where the story in Luke differs from what the Catholic Priest put in place at Baptismal celebrations is this. The source of vision for the child given on the day of his dedication did not come from the parents of the child. It came from outside the family through the attentive prayer of two aged people, whose vision lifted the veil on the life that had been gifted to Mary and Joseph. It was a marvellous vision, but not a comfortable one. Their cherished child was going to have an influential and significant life. He was going to touch people at the core and reveal the thoughts of many hearts. Through him things buried deep inside would be brought to the surface and many would be forced to think about the way they would choose to live. God offers us his presence in this chosen one, but not all want to receive what is offered. He was going to be a disturbing influence who challenged people to make choices - even his family would suffer because of him.

It was just another day at the Temple in Jerusalem, and it was just another couple dedicating their son to God. Unexpected things happened, but there were many who did not see this, or give thanks for the time of fulfilment that had dawned. Perhaps they were too busy changing money to buy pigeons for their offering. Or maybe they regarded Anna and Simeon as silly old fanatics, not to be taken seriously. But Simeon and Anna had prayed for the Kingdom to come, and now hailed it on its way. They went to their rest knowing they had seen and embraced the peace which passes understanding.

The deepest thing we can hope for is not the success of our children. It is the coming of God's reign in the world. The question for us on the New Year's day is: if that is so, in what ways are we working and praying for this to be fulfilled? And if we were given a tangible sign of the reign of God how would we react?