

Sermon for Sunday 28 January 2024

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Malachi 3: 1 – 5; Hebrews 2: 14 – end; Luke 2: 22 – 40

“the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple” (Malachi 3:1)

In the last book of our Old Testament the prophet Malachi promises that God will come to His Temple. It was about 400 years later before Jesus was born. 400 years of waiting and hoping that God would send his Messiah to lead His people Israel and to restore their place in the world.

We just heard the story of how God did come to His Temple. I wonder if you can imagine the scene? A large building with various courtyards around it. People coming and going. Busy, with groups of people moving around doing various things, - meeting, praying, stopping and staring. When Jesus comes to His Temple at last there's no fanfare, no special ceremony to welcome the King of Glory. Just an ordinary family coming to make the sacrifices for any firstborn son, a pair of

turtle doves or two young pigeons, because they were not wealthy. One little group among the many visitors that day. And yet, something extraordinary does happen.

First Simeon, and then Anna, recognise Jesus for who He is. They don't just see Him, they see Him with understanding. They recognise Him. You have probably all had the experience of suddenly recognising someone you know in a crowd. Perhaps you have been waiting for them to arrive, and suddenly you see them. You recognise their face and smile and move forward to greet them.

But Simeon and Anna had never seen this baby before – and in any case they were probably expecting to see a man with a beard – someone who looked like a leader - not a helpless baby. But somehow they both knew independently that this child was God's Messiah. The one who had been promised. The one they had both been waiting for.

You would think the priests, who thought they were holy and close to God might have noticed

the Messiah. But no. And interestingly, neither Simeon nor Anna were part of the official 'clergy' who served the Temple. So why did they recognise Jesus when others only saw another ordinary family that day? Well, Simeon and Anna were both devout and prayerful people, who had been longing and waiting for God to come to His Temple. Both had chosen to prioritise prayer and worship in their lives. God answered their prayers, and the Holy Spirit helped them to recognise Jesus for who He was and gave them the words to tell others about him.

So, how does the Holy Spirit help us to not just see, but recognise when Jesus is alive and active in the world today? How does the Holy Spirit lead and guide us to join in with what God is already doing?

Perhaps thinking about some of the other times when Jesus was recognised or not recognised will help us with this. I wonder if we can think of some of them?

Jesus was not recognised in his home town Nazareth or by the religious authorities

He was recognised when miracles occurred – healings, feeding people, demons cast out

He was recognised by the two disciples travelling to Emmaus when he broke the bread

He was recognised by Mary Magdalen on resurrection morning when He called her name.

Perhaps these give us some pointers to how we recognise Jesus today?

Perhaps we're more likely to recognise Jesus in places where darkness is being put to flight? Where people are engaging in the struggle for justice, peace and hope? Or bringing healing of some kind?

Perhaps we too recognise Jesus as we break bread together? At Communion, but also at times of hospitality and fellowship? Perhaps when we gather together to share the stories of our Christian journeys? – we often do this in our study and fellowship groups.

Or perhaps some of us recognise Christ most of all as Anna and Simeon did when we actively

practise a prayerful watchfulness – turning our eyes and ears and hearts for the sound of his voice and hoping to hear His call.

I'd like to suggest we might try more consciously to practise the art of recognising Christ, and of seeing what He might be inviting us to do

Yesterday was Holocaust Memorial Day. It's a day when we remember the 6m Jews murdered by the Nazis. I was very struck by the story of Sir Nicholas Winton, which surfaced again yesterday on the BBC website.

For those who don't know the story, Nicholas Winton was a stockbroker. Not I think a particularly religious man but definitely a humanitarian. In 1938 he had planned to go skiing, but instead a friend suggested he might go to Prague to help with the many refugees there. There were already people out there working to save them, but Nicholas noticed that no one was specifically making arrangements for the children to escape. He didn't do anything particularly heroic or dangerous, but he made a list of the most urgent cases. He took photos of the

children and tried to find a home and a sponsor for each child in Britain. In the end by his actions, working with others, he saved 664 children who would otherwise almost certainly have perished.

The point that struck me particularly was that when he got to Prague he didn't just see, he noticed; he recognised a particular need, and set about doing something about it. And in what he did a part of that terrible darkness was pushed back and love, welcome and hospitality was shown to those children. Surely Jesus was there.

We are marking the end of the season of Epiphany today. And Epiphany is about recognition. May we be people who not only recognise Jesus through the Holy Spirit, but recognise when He is calling us to serve Him in particular ways.

Amen

Revd Diana Young