

**Sermon for Sunday 31 January 2021 – The Presentation in the Temple – Hebrews 2: 14 – end;
Luke 2: 22 – 40**

I wonder what you noticed as you imagined that scene? I wonder where you were in the story? Somewhere right near the baby and his parents? Or further away in the shadows? If you noticed anything that seemed important you might want to note it down and remember it so that you can think about it some more later. If you didn't notice anything in particular, don't worry. Not everyone finds this way of engaging with the Bible helpful.

When I tried this at home, listening on my laptop, I was most struck by the size of the building. The sense of echoing space. It was a bit like being in a vast cathedral. Dark. With groups of people moving about. Subdued voices echoing around and different kinds of things going on all at the same time. It seemed to be a place of many visitors – some fleeting, some staying much longer. Some looking, others praying. Some frequent and familiar, others seeing the place for the first time.

When Jesus comes to His Temple for the first time He comes not with a fanfare or a great procession. There's no special ceremony to welcome the King of Glory. Just an apparently ordinary baby and His parents coming to observe the ordinary rites for any firstborn son. One little group among the many visitors that day. And yet, something extraordinary happens.

The great painter Rembrandt painted two versions of this scene.

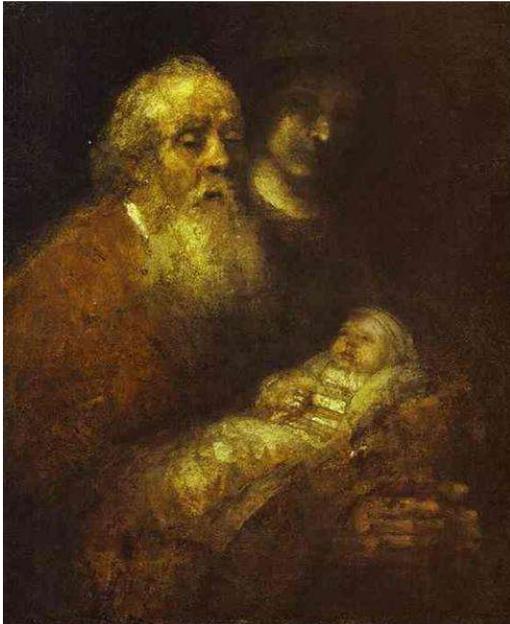
<https://www.rembrandtpaintings.com/presentation-of-jesus-in-the-temple.jsp>



Here is how he painted it in 1631 when he was aged 25. We see the vast building of the Temple, part ruined, echoing, the crowds of people. The attendants, Mary and Joseph. In some ways Mary is as much the focus of the painting as Jesus. The richly robed Simeon is holding the baby, and the light of Christ streams out onto his upturned face as he speaks. The painting of an ambitious young man, early in his career. He sincerely wants to show this holy moment, but he also wants us to know that he can paint it!

Rembrandt returned to this subject much later in his life. In fact in 1669, the year that he died. By this time he was an old man, and his eyesight was failing. And its this second painting that I want us to look at more closely

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/rembrandt/simeon-with-the-christ-child-in-the-temple>



Here is a much simpler more intimate portrayal. All of the background and the bustle has gone apart from one other shadowy person, so that we're focused in on the old man and the baby. Rembrandt has moved on. This is what interests him now.

So what does Rembrandt's picture tell us? Look at the old man's eyes. He seems to be blind, or nearly so, as was Rembrandt. He's been waiting a long time for God to fulfil His promise that he will see Lord's Messiah before he dies. He's very frail, he walks more by faith than by sight these days. But the Holy Spirit keeps him going, keeps on drawing him back to the Temple to pray. Notice his hands – arthritic, but outstretched - fingers almost together. He's in the middle of praying – and someone has gently placed the baby across his outstretched arms. This was not the answer he expected – or not at that moment anyway! We get our hands ready, don't we – when we think someone is giving us a baby to hold. He's been waiting, praying, hoping for so long, and suddenly the moment has taken him by surprise.

There's something about Simeon's attitude which also suggests offering. Simeon offers himself to God in prayer. And God offers himself to Simeon – and to us all - as a baby!

The baby sees Simeon, - or rather - gazes on him in that way that babies have of staring. Small babies can't focus well, as you probably know, although I believe they can from very young make out a face from lying in someone's arms. Jesus takes in Simeon's face, and light from Jesus' presence shines onto the old man's face so that he too is bathed in glory. His mouth is opening, ready to speak -

“Now Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light to reveal your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2: 29 – 31)

And Simeon, we're told has a great deal more to say to Mary and Joseph, and Anna too has much to say to all those who were longing and hoping for God's Messiah to come.

So what does this story have to say to us in our particular circumstances?

Many of us are very busy keeping on working and holding life together on a day to day basis. But life is far from normal, and we too are waiting and praying for so much. It's been going on for a long time now. Praying may be the only thing we can do about the big things, and it's the most important thing to do. Simeon and Anna knew that.

The way ahead is not yet clear, and the timing of any return to normality feels very uncertain. We too have to live more by faith than by sight just now. We have to learn patience and just keep going with our routines, including the routines of prayer and worship. Just as Simeon and Anna did.

God's answers to our prayers may not come when we expect, and they may be different from what we expect. But God is faithful and He will answer.

So we continue to offer ourselves to God; and He continues to offer Himself to us.

Jesus sees us. He really sees us. As we are. With all our frailties, our needs, our griefs, our frustrations - and our faithfulness despite it all. We are seen and known and loved by God.

I said at the beginning of the service that at Candlemas we look back to the baby in the manger, but we also begin to look forward to the man who went to the Cross for us. Here is our light and our salvation. Here is the way ahead.

Amen

Now we're going to listen to Anne singing those words of Simeon.

Revd Diana Young Candlemas 2021