

A Reflection from Revd Ali for Candlemas ~ Sunday 31st January 2021

Have you ever had a really perfect day?

Perhaps it was when you got good results at school?

Perhaps it was the moment that you realised you loved and were loved in return?

Perhaps it was your wedding day?

Perhaps it was the moment you met your new-born child?

It could be any number of things, and it will be entirely personal to you, but have you ever noticed that even if you are having the most amazingly perfect day, it can go completely unnoticed by others?

I think our Gospel reading is a little bit like that – it was a perfect day for a few people, but went unnoticed by the vast majority of people who would have been in the temple precinct that day.

Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple to present him to God. In the Hebrew tradition, the first-born son belonged to God, remembering the firstborn sons of Israel who were spared by God in Egypt at the first Passover. They brought with them offerings in accordance with the Jewish rites outlined in Leviticus. Jewish women had to wait for 40 days after the birth of a male child before entering the temple and offering either a lamb, if they could afford it, or two doves or young pigeons if they were less wealthy. These were to be offered at the Nicanor gate on the east of the court of the women.

I imagine they expected this trip to the temple to pass off as a quiet family occasion. I imagine that they probably came to the temple with a mixture of emotions, a sense of relief for the safe delivery of the baby, thankfulness for the gift of a child and pride at their new family. But also a reconnection with the wider community following the birth of Jesus.

But as Mary and Joseph make their way through the temple courtyards they encounter Simeon. Simeon was an old man, described by Luke as 'righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him'. Simeon knew his scriptures; he understood that God had promised to send a Messiah, someone to restore God's chosen people. As he sees the young family he was moved by the Holy Spirit to take the baby Jesus in his arms and as he does so, he recognises the 40 day old baby as the promise, the gift that he and all of Israel have been waiting for. We can only imagine his joy at that recognition, but then we hear in his words to Mary, that joy is tempered by the insight, the realisation that her child will suffer and she, his mother will suffer great anguish.

God had promised Simeon that he wouldn't die until he had witnessed the incarnation of the Messiah. He had waited faithfully and now that promise had been fulfilled. Perhaps the joy and the bittersweet recognition of all that Jesus would be, made this Simeon's perfect day.

Elizabeth Obbard describes Simeon as an icon of the heavenly father who accepts this offering of his Son, an offering which will be consummated on the cross. As a baby Jesus is placed in Simeon's arms; at the end of his life Jesus commends himself into the arms of his heavenly Father as he breathes his last.

As Mary and Joseph are trying to take in all that Simeon has said about Jesus, they are joined by Anna. Anna, an old lady of 84 who has probably lived in the court of the women since she was widowed and spend her days in worship and fasting. She was acknowledged as a prophet and had devoted her widowed life to God. Now she too recognised the infant Jesus as the future hope of Israel. She gives thanks to God for all that baby Jesus is and is going to be. She then talks of him, but not just to anyone who is passing, but to others who are also looking for the coming of the Messiah. Had Anna, I wonder, waited until the ripe old age of 84 for her perfect day?

Among all the people in the temple that day, Simeon and Anna were the only ones who recognised the true nature of Jesus as he was held in Mary's arms. They were overjoyed and welcomed him with love. The Holy Spirit revealed to them who Jesus was, and is and is to come.

But what of the rest of the crowd going about their business in the temple that day? Are we sometimes like the rest of them? Would we see, like they did, just another anonymous baby and take no notice? Do we ignore that same gift that is being offered to us every day? Do we walk on by, too busy, too wrapped up in our own lives and timetables, to take a moment to stop; hold out our arms and receive the gift that God longs for us all to embrace?

In the noise of our lives, with our work, our friends our families, our assorted deadlines - do we forget to stop and listen for the cry of the baby, the nudge of the Holy Spirit, the voice of our loving God who offers us all the chance of a perfect day every day; a life lived with and in the presence of God?

So how can we bring our attention back to the gift that we are being offered? Both Anna and Simeon had lived lives attentive to God, so that they were ready for the Holy Spirit to bring them rejoicing into Christ's presence.

And that's where I think our second reading from Malachi comes in. Theo Laetsch describes the book of Malachi as contrasting God's perfect holiness with our own imperfections and guilt.

Eugene Petersen describes Malachi as made for times when our life is ok, not perfect but also not in crisis, what we would describe as 'normal'. Sometimes when things are normal our interest in God can be pushed to the margins of our lives, we do the 'God stuff' in our heads rather than our hearts. Intellectualising God. Managing our affairs for our own convenience and not taking any notice of what God has to say. Imagining that God is not interested in our daily lives, only in perfect days or times of trauma.

Malachi reminds us that we should be waiting in anticipation for God, ready to respond to God, God is always coming to us. Petersen describes God's coming as both a delight and a difficulty. A delight because God comes to us; and a difficulty because God comes to cleanse us. Malachi speaks of this cleansing as judgement, of the refiner's fire, but he also reminds us that God tells us not to be afraid because we already know what we should be doing - to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. Malachi invokes Moses as he summarises the commandments. He simplifies all the complicated purity laws in Leviticus. Malachi tells it as it is – that we should not live lives that include sorcery, idolatry, adultery, perjury. We should not be people who cheat others, who oppress those who are powerless, the widow, the refugee and the orphan. Another Old Testament prophet puts it more succinctly, in Micah chapter 6 verse 8 Micah asks – what does the Lord God ask of you except to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Before experiencing their perfect day, Simeon and Anna had done all they could; like Mary and Joseph they had acted justly, loved mercy and walked humbly with God.

I hope that you don't have to wait until the end of your life like Simeon and Anna to experience that perfect day, that you will have many, many perfect days in your life. Unfortunately, at the moment, perfect days may be few and far between as the pandemic affects all of our lives, but my hope and prayer for us all; is that in the darkness there is a little light and the promise of perfect days to come will sustain us. Because our God offers us opportunity for a perfect day every day, no matter what has happened the day before. I know it is an overworked cliché but with God today *is* the first day of the rest of your life. You are loved. You can start your life with God afresh. You just have to make the decision that today will be your perfect day because you live it with and for God.

And, in the fullness of time, when the day comes to leave this earthly life we can truly say 'Lord, let your servant go in peace for I have seen the glory of the Lord'.

Amen.