

Sunday, January 28th 2024. Candlemas

Malachi 3.1-5, Psalm 24.7-10, Luke 2, 21-40

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are times when we may see a pivotal point in our lives, when life changes and goes in a different and maybe unexpected direction. We may look back over events in the past, and forward, perhaps with some trepidation, to what is to come, as we leave what has been familiar. We may be beginning a new job with more responsibility, which can be daunting, a couple may have a new baby, which changes the balance of the family and may involve childcare and other adaptations, or someone close to us dies, and we are left alone. All turning points.

In the first reading, the messenger or angel seems to represent an agent sent from God to prepare for his coming in judgement and grace. Who is he? What will he be like? It could possibly be John the Baptist. The messenger's function is to make possible God's return to his temple on a day of judgement, when the priests will be cleansed, so that God may again bless his people. It will involve suffering. The fire represents the effects of real justice in God's kingdom, and God's judgement on those, who are guilty of oppressing the innocent, victimising or exploiting those, who are unable to defend themselves. God is seen as coming to his house to put all in order. A turning point.

The ritual can be seen in Psalm 24. Twice the procession calls on the temple gates to open and to admit the Lord, who is symbolised by the ark. The God, who seeks entrance, is the King of Glory, whose power and authority are unlimited. The priest demands further identification of the God, and the procession answers that he is the God of battle, holy war, the mighty warrior and commander of Israel's hosts (armies). Compare mascots. The people believed that when the temple gates opened, so did the gates of heaven (eternal gates). All this is a community activity, maybe an opportunity to look back at the past and forward to the future. A pivotal point.

In the Gospel, Jesus is taken to Jerusalem for the fulfilment of religious duties and prediction of his destiny, which involved purification of the mother, who had to offer a sacrifice forty days after the birth of her child. The redemption of the child was the duty of the father, and required an offering of five shekels. Luke is anxious to have the parents and child together in Jerusalem, as it is the place of Jesus' destiny.

This destiny will be announced by Simeon, and both he and Anna show that this baby is different. He will be the Messiah, the Saviour of all, not just a baby at the centre of a family ceremony, but one, who will come to take people in a different direction, which will lead to opposition, suffering, to death and resurrection.

There have already been hints of this in the birth story in Luke's Gospel, which shows how, right from the start, Jesus was shut out, not recognised and criticised by the religious leaders, and his humble beginnings show how he himself will be humble and how this would lead to his being a servant of all people. In Matthew's Gospel, the gifts, which the wise men bring, have a significance; gold for kingship, although Jesus would not be the sort of king, which people were expecting, incense for worship and myrrh for suffering. These gifts would point to the life and ministry of Jesus.

In today's passage, all is revealed by two simple characters. We may find our faith changed by what someone said or did. Our parents or relatives may bring us to church when we are young; we may take part in a discussion, and find our assumptions challenged, or we may be going through a difficult patch and someone gives us some friendly help or advice, which may change life for us.

Today, there seems to be so much negativity in the news and in attitudes. We may be called to look at the world in a different way (Rae), to recognise that among all the mess and despair, God is present, there is a light shining in the darkness. It may be seen in the birth of a new baby, in the helping hand for someone, who needs it. In a small way, like Simeon and Anna, we can make a difference, create a turning point, and maybe have an impact in ways, which we had never imagined.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.