The Presentation 2020

Luke 2: 22-40

On the wall of my office, there is a mystery in a frame. It is a leaf from a choir book written in Latin with the text of the Presentation in the Temple on animal skin, large enough that a choir of monks would have been able to see it, and it is likely several hundred years old. There are certain things I know about it, including the text, the gothic script and the plainchant, the type of singing that has been used in western monasteries since the middle ages. But I have not felt the need to do much research on it this piece. I believe it is because there is a part of me that likes to preserve mysteries, things that I can know only in part, fundamentally because I confront mystery in the people I see here week-to-week, the guests with whom I eat breakfast on Sunday mornings, the folks looking back at me on Sunday evenings at evensong. If you are like me, so much of what we cling to in our lives is what we call certainty, the things that give our lives ballast, the sensation of control that we crave because we know that the greatest part of us will be a mystery to ourselves.

If we have this ongoing fascination with the parts of us we will never completely understand, how much more so with what we call our faith lives, where the stories we read, the creeds we set our hearts by, and the unknowable to which they point are so deeply intertwined that it is impossible to draw clean lines between where one stops and another begins. Today, for instance, is a continuation of the birth narratives we heard from Christmas; after spending several weeks with Matthew, we are looking back over our shoulder at the detail-ridden world of Luke, where real, verifiable events are shot-through with the holy. Mary and Joseph have brought their baby to the Temple, according to the custom of purification for mothers and blessing of first-born sons, to offer a sacrifice. The priest Simeon, who was there to receive the offering, has been waiting for them. Tipped off by the Holy Spirit, he is told that this is the child whom he has been longing to see and he gives thanks in one of the great canticles in our tradition, before telling the mother that this child is “destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel”. The holy couple hardly have time to recover from this pronouncement when a prophetess named Anna begins speaking to anyone who will listen about the child’s role in the redemption of Israel. Any day a child is presented at the temple would have been one of great solemnity, but the Holy Spirit has so permeated the event that we have to assume that the couple returns as different people than when they arrived.

If you are like me, we know that permeability of our world is not limited to the great markers of our lives, the births, baptisms, confirmations, even burials we witness. This is the last moment in the gospel that is specifically linked to Christmas and always occurs forty days after it, but it is an implicit reminder of how far the holy extends into our lives, if we allow ourselves to say yes to it. The mother is, after all, the same young woman who was minding her own business when an angel showed up and told her she would bear a child whose kingdom will have no end. Mary had a question or two at the time, but the holy couple have none. Presumably, you can get used to anything, angels appearing on your doorstep, people breaking into song as Simeon does here, along with almost everyone else at the beginning of Luke. More likely, however, it is the knowledge that the ordinary and the holy so interpenetrate each other that it often seems arbitrary to designate anything in our lives as products of everyday or the divine.

I have the privilege, for instance, of saying or singing the Song of Simeon every Sunday evening, along with the guests we have for evensong, as some of you have done. The results vary from the ordinary to the disturbing to the transcendent, depending upon the evening. But the reason that singing it, along with the Magnificat earlier in the service, is a privilege is because it is an invitation, a beckoning to see the holy in the everyday, even the appalling. In the Presentation, Christ comes among us as a child and he often shows up on Sunday mornings as a child, but as often as not, he shows up here as the homeless man unwilling to meet our gaze, in the woman with two backpacks and three kids, even those who arrive in such a state that they seem determined to make the evening interesting, and not in a good way. During those times, I remind myself that we need to be disturbed, to be shocked out of our own complacencies. I think of those portraits from the middle ages that have the nobles who commissioned them as figures inserted into the divine drama. They remind me that we are more than onlookers; we are participants in the work of God in the world if we are alert enough to see the working of the divine in the ordinary, the mystery contained in the everyday.

The other name for this feast is Candlemas, in celebration of the proclamation of Jesus as the light of the world. The light we crave, critical for those in the early church during the long winter nights, is about dispelling the temptation to believe there is something outside the reach of the divine. The Presentation tells us, as does the rest of the improbabilities of the nativity stories, is that God is capable of illuminating anything, of making the holy presence felt through the least likely of people and circumstances. I feel this in my own children and family, of the people I see on a Sunday morning, that each one is an offering of light and the most important, maybe the most difficult job, is simply to be alive and aware of that holiness.

So when they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth, just as we will return to our own homes after church. The challenge for us, on this day and throughout this season, is to be alive to the way the ordinary changes us in this place and the other places in our lives. Along with Simeon, with Mary and Elizabeth, we have to be able to sing about it, the way this God intrudes into our carefully-ordered lives and shocks us into transformation, of being the new people that our discipleship asks of us. The gift of the Presentation is that it reminds us that we too can be a light of revelation to all around us, simply by being aware of the holiness that pierces all our lives.