

## **The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Candlemas) 2017**

### **Called to give so that we may be a blessing to the world.**

The first reading we heard today was from one of the Old Testament Prophets, Malachi (Malachi 3:1-5) Now the job of a prophet is to make us sit up and listen. A prophet often points out where society or a group of people may be going wrong, how they can amend their ways, and the consequences if they do not. Sometimes the truths that prophets proclaim can be difficult to hear. Malachi is no different.

Malachi foretells the coming of the Messiah and all that it will mean for the human race. He tells us that the Messiah will be judge and will reveal what is truly in each individual heart.

It is from the backdrop of this and many other prophecies, from whole host of different prophets and eras, that our Gospel reading today is set (Luke 2:22-40). Jesus is brought to the Temple by his parents to present him to the Lord and so that he may be purified and sanctified, along with his blessed mother; sanctified for a life of service to God, his Father.

As such, he sets the example for every child whose parents wish them to be brought up under God's direction. An essential first step of a childhood of learning and worshipping God, forming them into one of God's flock until they are legally an adult.

For Jesus, this is all followed by his parents offering, through the priest, the appropriate sacrifice of two turtle doves and two young pigeons. This would not have been cheap for a family on the breadline. But it was essential that everything was done properly and no corners cut. A dodgy half price pigeon or two from the local corner stall, simply would not do. To short change God, would have been unthinkable at such a momentous moment in their lives. So it was important that they started off on the right foot and took seriously what they were doing. One of the marks of holiness is generosity and this holy family has it in spades. The ceremony would have ended with a generous money donation for the aid of God's valuable work through the Temple.

It is only as a result of Mary and Joseph's obedience to the ceremony and generosity of spirit, that the prophets, Simeon and Anna are able to recognise Jesus for who he is and so the two prophecies occur. These draw on all the richness of those earlier Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, speaking of Jesus' remarkable calling to be the salvation of humanity and the great cost that would bring, not only to those who were corrupt of heart, but also those who would witness first-hand the struggle Jesus would have to go through.

Did you know that the bible tells husbands that they must take their wives tea in bed? In fact, there is a whole book dedicated to it. It's call Hebrews!

We had a passage from Hebrews this morning and in it we heard just how Jesus fulfils the earlier testimonies. The author of Hebrews details how in Jesus, because he knows the secrets of all our hearts, our sins are forgiven. But more than that, he conquers the fear of death, the driving force behind all that is evil in the human soul. He transforms death from a dark ending into the very gateway to a glorious everlasting future in heaven. He does this by becoming like us, so that we can see how we may become more like him.

In Jesus, God becomes man and sacrifices everything in order to overcome all that evil can throw at him and us. He gives himself for us, so that we can be set free.

So we model ourselves on him in the hope that we may be worthy of taking his hand. We serve because it is in the serving that we receive true freedom and fullness of life.

So, we bring our children to be presented before him and we live our lives in complete service to him, for anything less simply will not cut it. Anything less simply will not feel adequate in response to all he gives, has given and will give, for us.

What this practically means for each of us, is for each of us to work out and work through. It is not for anyone else to judge. It is an honest discussion between us and God.

What is clear, however, is that giving God the stuff that is left over will not cut it. It is not fair for us to only give him the time we have left after we have done everything else we aspire to do – we must schedule him a decent amount of time in our week. Neither is it right to only give him the proportion of our resources that are left over after everything else has been taken care of.

Billy Graham used to say that most churches are like football matches. 22,000 people (wouldn't that be nice)... 22,000 people watching, whilst 22 people play the game. If we are to become the people God truly wants us to be, then that must change, that number must be reversed. In our church we need the 22,000 people being active in God's service, not sitting back and watching the others get on with it. Only then, will we be transformed into the people God wishes us to be.

We have each been brought into God's presence from a whole host of avenues; but God calls us here for one purpose: to serve him in the beauty of holiness and to serve him wholeheartedly so that we may feel ourselves worthy of all he has done, is doing and will do for us.

So what should you be doing? Well that is between you and God. It is not for me, nor anyone else to judge. What is clear, however, is that each and every one of us can and should be doing something. There is not one person who cannot do or give something.

Our time, our talents, our friendship, our care, our money, our resources are all gifts that God has blessed us with and each of us can give a little back. These are the things that mark our discipleship.

Malachi records the following in the very next verse from where the reading ended a moment ago: 'Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'how are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! (says the Lord)' (Malachi 3: 6-7). This is but one of a whole number of references in the bible to tithing. In fact, the bible has masses to say about sharing our money. Throughout the Bible, God's people are asked to give at least one tenth (a tithe) of their income and produce to build up God's work; so that the refugee, the homeless, the poor and the widow may be fed, the orphan, the invalid and the leper cared for, and God's holy house maintained.

For some of us, 10% will be but a drop in the ocean, but for others 1% might be more than we can afford – a bit like the widow who gives all that she has. Let me remind you of the story: 'As Jesus was sitting opposite the treasury, He watched the crowd placing money into it. And many rich people put in large amounts. Then one poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amounted to a small fraction of a denarius. Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all the others..."' (Mk 12:41-43).

So what we give must depend on our own circumstances. It is for no-one else to judge. It is between them and God. But let us all be honest with the God who knows all and gives all so that we might live.

Some people resent giving to the Church. But I ask you what is the Church? The Church is not a group of other people sitting hundreds of miles away hoarding our money. The diocese isn't somebody else manipulating and manoeuvring to take our assets. The Church is us. It is God's people in this place trying to do God's work as best they can. God has placed our bishop over us to help us in our journey and our bishop has appointed individuals just like us, from churches just like ours, in order to help him order the massive task he has in doing so. The Church, the Diocese, is us, God's people come together to help transform the world under His Spirit and through His love. We are God's Church, no one else. We do not give our money to anyone other than God, and he uses it for his work in this place. So that heaven may come closer and the whole world come to know him as their compassionate, loving Lord.

But all this is about so much more than money. This is about modelling ourselves on the life of the one who saves us – one whose generosity is limitless.

So, as many of us as possible should come together regularly as one body, Christ's Body. One body of people in worship to God and to share with him in the Eucharist and to give thanks to him for all he is and does.

As many of us as possible should step forward to serve him in the roles of his Church, to help his Church flourish and to take his love out into the world so that more may recognise him.

But even those of us who feel we cannot help any more than we currently do, can contribute in other unbelievably transformative ways; by praying and coming. Every night before you go to bed, say your prayers. Pray for yourselves, for your family and friends, for the world and for the flourishing of the Church. Pray that it may be built up and grow, that it may receive the resources it needs, that it may have the many hands it needs to do all the work God wishes it to do. And do your bit to help build it up, by coming. Because every time one member of our body decides they have something better to do, our body is broken and we are far weaker as a result. Every time one of his flock is missing, Jesus' heart bleeds and his body breaks one more time on the cross.

In Genesis, when God blesses Abraham, God tells Abraham that he will send him to be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 22:17-18). In exactly the same way, God calls us together and blesses us and then sends us out to be a blessing to the world. He does not bless us for us to hoard it to ourselves like gold in a chest, nor to leave it in his holy house, where we found it. He calls us together as His Church to be a blessing to all creation. We can only do that if we are united, active, well resourced, passionate and strong.

Christ is brought to the Temple, God's Holy House, to be presented to the Father so that he can grow to know the Father's love for him and be a blessing to the world in his Father's service. We come here for the same reason and we leave with the same task.

Amen.