

**Sermon 04/02/2024. - Candlemas / Presentation of Christ
Baptism of Rose (2yrs9mth) Ewan (4yrs7months). St John's Beeston**

What a wonderful coincidence of words and actions! This morning's service has a very happy collision of family events, Gospel reading and liturgy.

The Gospel story that we have set for today is that lovely account of Mary and Joseph taking their baby boy to the Temple in Jerusalem. When they got there they get caught up in the crowd of pilgrims that a city like Jerusalem attracts plus all the other business of a major centre of population. Somehow in the middle of all these thronging people an old man and an old woman, Simeon and Anna, recognise something special in this child and we have Luke's account of what was said and done.

I wonder how comfortable Joseph and Mary were about letting a complete stranger pick up their month-old baby boy and this old boy going off into an ecstatic extempore prayer! But I like the contrast of a month-old baby and an old man at the end of his life.

I don't know how Simeon got the message. Month old babies can be very sweet and compliant, but they can also be a bit smelly, desperate for a feed, nuzzling your arm because if you move them they think it's time to start sucking again, not happy to be handled by strangers. Jesus did not come with a label attached saying 'I'm the one you're waiting for' but somehow Simeon got it – this child was going to light up the world with truth about God and the truth about people.

Simeon's words have become a set text in the liturgy of the Anglican Church. For those of you who like tradition and old things, you will know these words from the BCP service of Evening Prayer. Some of you will be able to say them from memory:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace : according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen : thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared : before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

A light to lighten the Gentiles, or as this morning's translation had it 'a light for revelation for the gentiles', or to be slightly less word for word pedantic in our translating, Jesus is the light that shows us truth.

Light is a picture we use often in religious language and that is not just confined to those of us who are Christians.

Some of you will know by heart the evening prayer that starts – lighten our darkness we beseech Thee O Lord

At every service here in church we light candles, and as a special piece of symbolism today Ewan and Rose will each receive a candle to remind them of the light they receive in their baptism this morning. And you should be put in mind of the light you received at yours.

You will have heard a hundred sermons where the preacher has talked about light – you know all that stuff – but let me just remind you of what you already know.

Have you ever been into a cave used by our early ancestors, perhaps Creswell Crags just up the road from here? Walls are covered with pictures of the wild animals hunted by these first people. You cannot see them with the naked eye, it's dark and they are scratched, faintly, into the surface of the rock deep underground in the cave. However, if you shine a light at a certain angle across the surface then suddenly the wall becomes alive with deer and bison.

What is there hidden by the darkness – light reveals it – the light shows what is really there – and preachers have used this picture to remind us that light reveals the true nature of things, it shows truth.

Because of His very nature, God is hidden from us. He is immortal, invisible, you cannot make pictures of Him, language gives us vague approximations but you can't really nail God down. He is hidden because of the limitations of our minds. However, if you want to know God and what he is like, then Jesus is the one who lights that darkness for you. As you work at understanding who Jesus was and is, so you get closer and closer, as close as the finite boundaries of the human mind will allow, close to having the truth of God illuminated. Not just being able to say that God is love, but also knowing that God is love.

And the light shows the truth about you and me. The light that has come in Jesus shows us that we are precious – we are as precious to God as a child is to its parents, as that tiny baby was to Joseph and Mary. We are loved by God.

The light also shows us clearly that we often mess up. Yes we are cranky, yes we mess life up, yes we often seem to go out of our way to extinguish what little bit of light there is in us, but that is what all children do, not just little children like Rose and Ewan, but big, grown-up children of God who ought to know better like you and me.

We are loved for who we are, not what we do, not what we have or haven't achieved, but for who we are. God loves us. We are his children.

This morning's Eucharist on the feast of Candlemas coupled with Alex and Fiona bringing Rose and Ewan to baptism, shine a spotlight on this truth that light has come into the world in the person of Jesus, that this is the light that lightens the gentiles and this is the light that should light up the rest of your week ahead.