Sermon

Presentation of Christ

2/2/20

Eltham

**Readings**

Malachi 3:1-4

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

+FSHS

It might seem an odd choice to talk about suffering on one of the brightest and most hopeful light-filled feasts in the church calendar, memorable for me because it’s the 12th anniversary of my deaconing today. But suffering runs as a red thread through the readings today, and given the incredible suffering of our country over the last couple of months, it begs some exploration and perhaps explication in the Epiphany light.

We celebrate the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph in bringing the child Jesus to the temple “to do for him what was customary under the law”. What was customary under the law was the presentation of the firstborn male to God, who under the Mosaic covenant claimed the firstborn male that opened a womb as God’s own, to be dedicated to God, a tangible reminder that the people themselves as a whole belonged to God. The assumption was that dedicating the firstborn would be by sacrifice (not all firstborn males like Samuel could live in the temple), though the Mosaic law required the substitute of an animal, given that human sacrifice was abominable and contrary to God’s desire for the people to choose life. (Later in the OT the prophets railed against the people for sacrificing their children to Canaanite gods like Moloch.) The substitution of a lamb or kid goat, or a pair of doves for the really poor was therefore an act of mercy on God’s part. So it’s like the child Jesus is offered/dedicated to God, but is saved from the priest’s knife by two innocent doves.

Then we have the chilling words of the prophet Simeon, holding the child: “This child is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” I imagine most mothers can empathise with this: having a child is a risk, and involves risky love as you don’t know what the child will become, what good or ill awaits them. Many mothers would give their own lives for those of their children, and it seems to me that while motherhood brings joy, it’s also a perpetual sorrow. For Mary will later stand at the foot of the cross and watch her son dying an ignominious death involving great suffering.

Then in the second reading we heard an excerpt from Hebrews which talks about Jesus as “a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God,” making “a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people”. And in the first reading there was the reference to God’s messenger suddenly coming like fuller’s soap or a refining fire purifying and refining the descendents of the priestly tribe of Levi so that they can again offer right sacrifices in the temple.

To sum all this up: we have lots of very religious language here that talks about sacrifice, suffering, blood, substitution, purification, pain, piercing, death. And somehow this is all tied to Jesus, and all tied to him on this Feast of his Presentation in the temple. It’s kind of hard to avoid: at the centre of our faith is a man dying on a torturous cross, his suffering plain. And this prompts a whole raft of questions: what does his suffering mean? What does it mean for us? Does it mean that suffering is good? Is it God’s will that Jesus suffered? Is it God’s will that we suffer? If Jesus “offered a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” just like the high priests in the OT temple on the day of atonement, what does that mean? How can we make sense of our suffering and the suffering of the world mean in the light of Jesus’ suffering and death?

I’m not going to answer all those questions today (and some of them don’t have an answer but point to mystery). I am hoping that we’ll be digging into and exploring some of them over the course of this year. (What Matters About Jesus short course SFC starting February 16th and running each 3rd Sunday of the month after each service.)

What we can’t do is to ignore that these questions – and the language going with them – is right there in front of our eyes and our ears each week, and each time we celebrate the Eucharist where we say: “By his death on the cross and rising to new life, he offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people.” And later we pray that by God’s Word and Holy Spirit, we who eat and drink the bread and wine “may be partakers of Christ's body and blood.” Jesus, sacrifice, suffering, our salvation and our union with him is right at the centre of what we do.

And this is why we are celebrating Jesus’ parents rocking up at the temple with the babe in tow to present him to God, today. Because the best news is that in Jesus God became one of us, or as the writer to the Hebrews says, “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God”. Because he himself suffered, he is right there alongside us in our suffering, and even more, because he overcame suffering, sin, death with everlasting life, he is able to help those and that which suffers. All who suffer are one with him, and in him suffering finds meaning and healing and hope.

And it goes beyond suffering, this good news. In his presentation in the temple Jesus’ life – and we can take here the whole essence of his life, because to shed blood is to shed life-essence – is dedicated to God. This is hope: because in the beautiful words of Simeon: “my eyes have seen your salvation… a light to brighten the eyes of the gentiles, and for glory to your people”. Jesus’ dedicated presence among us brings light, God’s light and life and hope just by his presence with us. And better still, if he shares our flesh and blood, then we too get to share in that light and glory – along with the mission that goes with it, that it’s not for us to sit around enjoying the light and glory and keeping it to ourselves. It’s for us, as it was for Jesus as he grew and as his ministry took off, to shine the light of the good news of God with us, and to bring glory to all the places that are dark and marred and broken and charred, whether by natural causes or by human greed and sin. We are to be agents of healing, as Jesus was, for healing is closely aligned with salvation and deliverance and new hope and light and life.

That’s a lovely idea, and much needed as an antidote to the heavy language of a few minutes ago. What does it look like practically? How do we bring good news to our next door neighbor? Or to one of our children going through a messy divorce? Or to a grandchild who’s decided this whole religious business is a load of baloney? Well, it’s not that I’m suggesting we go nextdoor and ask if our neighbour’s given their life to Christ and accepted Jesus as their personal lord and savior. Nor is it about standing on street corners saying repent or be damned. In fact neither of those methods is at all productive or useful, and nor are they at all light-filled or ultimately good news. Rather, good news happens when we are able to talk about God’s goodness to us – like Simeon and Anna. Good news happens when we offer healing hands, a shoulder to cry on, an ear as a sounding board. Good news happens when we forgive, when we choose not to act out of anger but out of understanding. Good news happens when we demonstrate compassion. Good news is discovering a tasty nugget of scripture which gives new light to us, and we really have to tell someone about it. Good news happens in our midst when we break bread together in Eucharist. Good news happens when we are in touch with the transforming experience of encountering Jesus for ourselves – and in following him find ourselves changed. Good news is Jesus sharing our life in every respect – including our suffering and mortality – in order that we may become like him, and share his everlasting life.

May we, each of us, know the healing presence of Jesus this week, and be messengers carrying his good news to all the places we go this week.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**