

SERMON ST. JOHN'S  
2 FEBRUARY 2020 10.00 a.m.

THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE (CANDLEMAS)

**Readings: Malachi 3.1-5**  
**Hebrews 2.14-18**  
**Luke 2.22-40**

**Prayer:**

Come Holy Spirit and inspire my words and all our hearts so that we may each receive your unique word for us this morning. In the name of our Lord, and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Sermon:**

**Please sit down.**

It's bizarre isn't it? A young couple and their gurgling baby enter the Temple and are approached by an elderly, respected Temple regular, who takes a quick look at their son and declares "God's salvation!". I don't know about you but if I had been there I would probably have moved up to Simeon, and said "for heavens sake, Simeon, it's a baby."

What is Simeon going on about? What does he mean when he refers to Jesus as 'God's Salvation'?

Well if I think of *salvation* or *being saved* then I would normally associate the word '**from**' with it. For example, we might be saved **from** drowning, saved **from** falling, saved **from** having to admit we haven't done what we promised by a chance of circumstances.

So what is it that this baby, which Simeon is so keen to say is God's Salvation, saving us **from**?

The Old Testament reading from Malachi gives us some clues. This book was written some years after the Jews had returned from exile and they were complaining. They felt that they were the people of God, and as they performed the required sacrifices and tithed the stipulated tithes God should be showering them with blessings? Why weren't blessings flowing freely their way?

Through Malachi, God answers these questions by telling the people that they are just going through the motions. That they don't care about His honour, they don't fear Him, and they sacrifice the rubbish and not the best. Then he points out that they grumble about having to tithe.

The truth is, Malachi tells the Jews, they do not know God at all.

I wonder if we are a little like Malachi's audience. Might we if faced by God today defend ourselves by saying something like: "Well, I go to Church every week! I join in the Service and take communion. I tithe or do planned giving." But if pushed do we **know** Jesus or simply know **about** him.

It's possible to go to church every week of our entire lives and still not know Jesus at the end of them. The Jews of Malachi's day managed it and if we are in any way like them, only going through the motions, then we shall be the same.

Malachi warns that such a situation is serious, because the Lord we are seeking will suddenly come and present himself to each of us one day. Of course, this is not something surprising to any of us, but I believe that it is the biggest problem for the human race. I know that we are often diverted by the news into thinking that our problem is either leaving the EU, Arab Nations, climate change, floods, bush fires, new viruses or any other disaster, but actually what we are all most afraid of is our own death and being judged by the perfect judge who knows everything.

Yes, He will know absolutely everything.

I believe that we do try to honour God, but we are rebels who want to rule our own lives. So, we therefore all live, to a greater or lesser extent, in fear of death. And it is from this fear of death that Jesus saves us and releases us.

But how on earth will this baby Jesus save us from the fear or shadow of death and so release us to live the lives that God intended for us?

Well the readings today are beautifully linked, and we have heard the answer to that question in our reading from Hebrews. I will try to paraphrase it.

God came in the form of a baby because we all start out as babies. I know some of us don't like to think we started as babies but that is a fact! And to save us God had to become like us in every way, to be tempted and to suffer as we do. So, Jesus came as a baby and grew up just as we grow up.

For generations the Jewish priests had sacrificed animals to exonerate humans who otherwise stood to receive the consequences of their sinful rebellion against God. But you cannot pay the price of a human life with a lamb. These animals were symbols pointing to the coming Messiah, who at the start of his ministry, if you remember, is declared to be "the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". The baby was God's salvation, by becoming God's sacrifice to pay the price of the sins of all those who will accept him, turn away from their sins and receive him as their Lord and Saviour for the rest of their lives.

That was Jesus' great mission: he came to die to save us.

Simeon knew he would be allowed to live long enough to see the era of salvation which was about to begin.

He rejoices in the fact that such salvation is to be for the whole world. It is 'for all people', a light for revealing things to Gentiles.

It's notable that Luke has been stressing how law-abiding Jesus and His parents were, yet although Jesus was born a Jew and all the Jewish Laws have been fulfilled His salvation is not only for Jews. The Jewish Saviour is Saviour of the world.

When people encounter Jesus, they react in one way or another. No one can be neutral or impartial. Some will reject Jesus in anger and disbelief. Others will find in Jesus One who brings forgiveness, the knowledge of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In one way or another the true thoughts of the heart get exposed when Jesus draws near. Some reveal their faith; others reveal their unbelief and antagonism. But no one stays the same, when Jesus comes to them.

Accepting the Gospel for any of us is not free, it will cost us our pride. If we have been challenged by the impending judgement Malachi talks about, the salvation proclaimed by Simeon and Anna and explained in Hebrews we will have to accept the stark, unpleasant truth that we can't save ourselves. Our pride has to be sacrificed because we will have to admit that we can never have a close relationship with God on our own merits.

Many of us of course accepted this truth many months or years ago and have a relationship with God because of Jesus' sacrifice and we know Jesus as Lord. We have admitted that we could never merit right standing before God, and we try to follow the example of Christ, the humble saviour. But we struggle and actually most of us don't do too well. We constantly need reminding what humility is and what it isn't.

Humility doesn't mean developing an inferiority complex or a doormat instinct instead humility is letting go of status, it is saying "I don't desire to be held great by the world".

Humility is servant heartedness. It is a master washing his disciples' feet, because they need washing and humility is remembering, in the words of the Apostle Paul that, if we work well, achieve much and receive praise, what we have is only what we have been given.

Also, remember that Jesus's family were poor. They offer a sacrifice of 2 pigeons or turtledoves. The law required that a one-year old lamb should be offered. But if a family was desperately poor the law had a special provision for them. Turtledoves or pigeons were easy to catch. The poor could capture them for no charge. Needy people could offer 2 doves or pigeons instead of the more expensive lamb. So, the fact that Joseph and Mary offer the 2 birds shows that they were not rich people.

If we need proof that financial prosperity is not guaranteed to every godly person this is it. Mary was highly honoured in being chosen as Jesus' mother but that did not bring her financial prosperity.

In summary, we are naturally in rebellion against God, and will experience his judgement in the fullness of time. But God, in his compassion, was not content to leave it like that and sent Jesus as a baby so that he could ultimately die on a cross in place of us. Jesus' sacrifice, provided we accept it and turn away from our sins and back to God, will save us and lead to our being welcomed, one day, into heaven. To accept this gift, we need to admit that we can never save ourselves, acknowledge Jesus as King and live humble lives that reflect his character.

The upside to this is that as we lose ourselves in Christ, we gain a peace which goes beyond human understanding and a richness of life which is never dulled by the shadow of the grave.

I pray that we may all walk this way and be released, through Christ's salvation, to be the people that God fully intended us to be. Amen.