

Epiphany 4 Candlemas 2009c

None of us can have escaped the horrific pictures of the terrible earthquake in Haiti and the aftermath of destruction and suffering. And we as Christians find it hard to equate the death and destruction with a God who loves us and cares for us.

And we can reflect that these tragedies seem to happen round about this Christmas/ Epiphany season which seems to contrast with Christmas celebrations and add to the sense of horror.

But we may be selective in our reading for Matthew reminds us of the cruelty of King Herod and the death of all boys born in Bethlehem under the age of two years.

There is an equally somber note in our Gospel reading for today when the Baby Jesus is presented in the temple according to Jewish law . As we read this account we realize that the new kingdom promised is a totally different sort of kingdom to that of Caesar Augustus. It is indeed the kingdom that God had promised for centuries; but, not for the last time, Luke is warning us that it isn't going to look anything like what people had expected.

In particular, this is becoming a story about suffering. Simeon is waiting for God to comfort Israel. Anna is in touch with the people who are waiting for the redemption of Israel. They are both living in a world of patient hope, where suffering has become a way of life. It now appears that God's appointed redeemer will deal with this suffering by sharing it himself.

Simeon speaks dark words about opposition, and about a sword that will pierce Mary's heart as well.

So Luke is saying, this is what happens when the kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of the world.

Luke invites us in the early part of his gospel to watch through the rest of his gospel as the prophecies come true. Mary will look on in dismay as her son is rejected by the very city to which he offered the way of peace, by the very people he had come to rescue.

Finally, the child who is, as Simeon says, “ is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against”, - this child himself passes through death and into resurrection, taking with him the hopes and fears of the city, the nation and the world.

But if Luke is giving us the dark tones of suffering, he is also showing that the kingdom brought by this baby is not for Israel only, but for the whole world. Simeon had grasped the truth at the heart of the Old Testament when Israel's history comes to God's climax, then at last light will dawn for the world.

All the nations, not just the Jews, will see what God is unveiling - a plan of salvation for all people without distinction.

This will be the true glory of Israel itself, to have been the bearer of a great promise, the nation from which the true world ruler would arise: 'A light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.' This is not the sort of revelation the world was expecting, and not the sort of glory Israel wanted, but it is true revelation and true glory none the less.

Luke adds yet another human dimension to the story.

By the time the first two chapters are finished, almost all his readers will have found someone in the story with whom they can identify.

We have met the older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, surprised to have a child at last.

We have seen the young girl, Mary, even more surprised to have a child so soon, and her husband coming with her to the **Temple**, offering the specified **sacrifice**.

The next section will feature Jesus himself on the threshold of young adult life.

Now, in this passage, we have the old man and woman, Simeon and Anna, waiting their turn to die, worshipping God night and day and praying for the salvation of his people.

Luke seems to want to draw readers of every age and stage of life into his account of the early life of Jesus.

No matter who you are or where you are in life, the story of Jesus, from the stable in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story. Each one of us can identify ourselves with people in the account. You can make it your story as it were.

In becoming your story, it can become your vocation – your Christian path through life.

Everybody has their own role in God's plan. For some, it will be active, obvious, working in the public eye, perhaps preaching the gospel or taking the love of God to meet the practical needs of the world.

For others, it will be quiet, away from public view, praying faithfully for God to act in fulfilment of his promises.

For many, it will be a mixture of the two, sometimes one, sometimes the other. Mary and Joseph needed Simeon and Anna at that moment; the old man and old woman needed them, he had been waiting for them, and now thanked God for them. The births of **John the Baptist** and Jesus are already beginning their work, of drawing people of all sorts into new worship and fellowship.

Simeon and Anna represent the faithful remnant of the Jewish people who, through the long centuries, had kept faith and hope alive as they waited for the moment of fulfillment lying before them in the shape of the baby Jesus.

Simeon's prayer known often as the "Nunc Dimittis" " you may now dismiss your servant in peace" brings together many of hopes that they had. There is a great sense of gratitude and trust. God has kept his promises. Simeon knows that that he can now go in peace and God is in control. And this revelation to Simeon was possible because Simeon's whole life had been lived in the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit.

Anna has long known widowhood and yet has found a meaning for her life in the service of God's Temple. It is fitting that such faith and devotion should be rewarded by a sight of the Christ himself. The account of Jesus being presented in the temple and what has gone before in Luke's gospel draws us closer in to God as we can understand and bring into our own lives the people we meet.

The example of the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary, and Zechariah and Elizabeth and Simeon and Anna are beacons of faith and courage – they have also been touched by God's overwhelming love .

We are invited to come close to God in a similar way – We are immerse ourselves in God's gifts we heard of in our new testament reading : Faith hope and love. We are to come closer to God in a very special way.

And to do that we inviting each one of us to take the Word of God into our hearts during this Lent. The Challenge 2010 leaflet asks us to learn a short piece of Luke's Gospel each day .

Read it

Learn it

Pray about it

And try to put it into action in our daily life.

When you think about it the lives of the people in Luke's Gospel so far have not been easy and for Jesus and John the Baptist it will never be easy.

And this is true of our lives with its tragedies both great and small.

We can only see it as part of life in this beautiful and unkind world. What made a difference to the people we have met this morning was that they had faith and trust in God – the God of love – Paul in his letter to the Corinthians reminds us that "love never fails" . He reminds us that in the end only faith, hope and love remain – and the greatest of these is love. So we have that great promise that the love of God will be with us for always whatever happens – we will never walk alone . Amen.