

Presentation of Christ to the Temple 2013

'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple'.

So wrote the prophet Malachi.

But the words that follow do not immediately fit comfortably with the passage in Luke. Jesus, our Lord, has come to the Temple, but as an infant. An offering is being made at the Temple for the purification of Mary and Joseph 40 days after the birth, according to the law. They will now once again be able to take part fully in religious ceremonies. And the presentation of Jesus is somehow combined with this – a making holy, a giving to God, rather in the manner of Samuel being offered to the Temple by his mother. This is what we celebrate at Candlemas. It is a feast day, a celebration. Traditionally it is the day when the church blesses all the candles used in worship.

In Malachi, it doesn't sound quite so celebratory. There is much talk of purification. But this is a harsher reading - frightening even. 'But who can abide the day of his coming' as we sing in the Messiah. God will purify the Levites like refiner's fire. And he will judge the oppressors of the poor, those who thrust aside the aliens and all who have done wrong.

These two pieces of the jigsaw do not seem to fit. In some ways this is not surprising, the context is completely different, yet our lectionary planners have put them together. Perhaps we need to look at some more pieces to get a more complete picture. For example, further on in Luke's gospel (19:46) Jesus says 'it is written my house is a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves.' Or St John's gospel – (2: 19) Jesus said: 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.'

The first of these two additional passages gives a clear link with the Samuel story. If you remember, the child Samuel was called by God in the night and Eli, the elderly priest eventually realised it was God calling and told him to listen. And God gave Samuel a terrible message – to tell Eli, the only father figure he really knew, that because Eli's sons had behaved so sacrilegiously and Eli had not prevented this, the whole family would be destroyed. Not an easy message for a young boy to convey to his master. But he does it.

Jesus has the same message.

All the way through the bible we can find evidence that the thing that upsets God the most is religion gone bad – hypocrisy, corruption, disrespect, the quest for power. Jesus delivers this message. He rants against hypocrisy. He overturns the tables in the temple because of the corruption.

Malachi states 'he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.' Is this part of the purification process?

No-one is perfect. No priest is perfect. No-one can be perfect. But when anyone, in the name of God, sets themselves up as above the law, or exploits their position for personal gain or status, they bring the whole of their religion into disrepute. Jesus showed great compassion to thieves, to money lenders, to prostitutes; but religion gone bad angered him.

But what about the second of the two additional jigsaw pieces, about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. This saying confused and outraged the authorities because they assumed that he was talking about the Temple building which had taken years and years to construct. But he was talking about his body and the resurrection. St Paul, in writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6: 19) takes up this theme and extends it. He says ' Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God.'

Suddenly the phrase from Malachi 'the Lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple' takes on a whole new meaning.

Christ, the Son of God, was human, with all that that implies – open to temptation, able to suffer pain and to die, able to cry and to feel the desolation of betrayal. And because of that, because of that identification, all humanity can be his dwelling place.

We too can be Temples, dwelling places for Christ. When we seek him, he does come to us. Human as we are, we too are open to temptation, subject to pain and to death. But the question is: are they our masters? Or is love our master? Are we fit for purpose as temples of Christ? Will he need to overturn the tables, drive out the money lenders? To have the spirit of Christ in us is to be prepared to suffer for love's sake. It is to have no fear of death.

It is to be like Simeon and be able to say 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation'.

It is to be at peace. Amen.