

LENT COURSE WEEK ONE

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Luke 2:21-40)

Painting by Guercino (1591-1666)



By way of background the name Guercino actually means “squint-eyed”, a rather unpromising name for such an outstanding artist. Guercino’s full name was in fact Giovanni Francesco Barbieri. He came from Cento, a small town between Ferrara and Bologna and he was virtually self-taught. A local nobleman lent him rooms from which to study and paint and he founded a small academy encouraging other young painters and particularly promoted the depictions of the human form. His most famous and dramatic work is “The Incredulity of Thomas” which has Thomas reaching out his hand to touch the wounds of Jesus. That, and the subject of today’s meditation, “The Presentation of Christ in the Temple”, both hang in the National Gallery.

St Luke’s Gospel (2:21-40) is the passage upon which this work is based so it is helpful to read it now as we study the picture

Guercino’s depiction is full of meaning and has a poignancy which makes it particularly suitable as a Lenten meditation: Simeon is, seen here in a highly stylised portrayal as a Bishop. Luke tells us that he was a devout, spiritually attuned old man who knew that he had to come to the Temple that day and that he knew what to expect.

As he took the infant in his arms he just knew that this was the long-awaited Messiah and he utters those immortal words which we have come to know as the Nunc Dimittis, recited in the church to this day at every Evening Prayer – “Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation”

Notice in the picture how Mary lovingly lets go of her child and how Joseph prepares to place Him in the outstretched arms of Simeon. Mary’s gaze is fixed entirely upon Jesus as if she knows and trusts entirely what is about to be said about him. She is calmly accepting of both. Joseph, however, is incredulous of Simeon’s words. Joseph is almost reeling back from Simeon’s outstretched arms, not wanting to entrust Jesus to him. However, together they lift the infant towards the old man’s outstretched arms.

It is no accident that the artist has chosen to depict Simeon in such a venerable way. Simeon is actually revealing, for the first time, the Word of God, the Messiah. Indeed, he is revealing the very means by which God has chosen to enter the world of sinful humanity, the means by which, once and for all, God offers us the means of redemption. “My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel”.

“My eyes have seen your salvation”..... a salvation which had been predicted by Isaiah centuries before. Cast your eye to the top of the picture. A rather wizened tree stump, seemingly ancient and lifeless but out of which, on closer inspection, there are springing green shoots Listen to what Isaiah predicted: (*read Isaiah 11. 1-11*). “In that day, the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people”. Here is God reaching out to us a second time. Here is the second Adam who, unlike the first, will not fail. As Newman reminds us in his wonderful hymn:

*“O loving wisdom of our God; when all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.
O wisest love! That flesh and blood which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe, should strive and should prevail.”*

But the battles, as Simeon predicts, will be fierce and the ultimate victory not without pain. “You see this child” He says, “He is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed.” And he says to Mary “And a sword will pierce your own soul, too. How truly and painfully would those words be fulfilled as Mary stood at the foot of the cross, watching her own Son, her own flesh and blood die in agony. To quote Newman again:

*“And in the garden, secretly and on the cross on high,
Should teach His brethren and inspire, to suffer and to die.”*

The cross, of course, was to replace the sacrificial offerings of the Temple. God gave this baby, His only Son, to be “The one oblation of himself once offered; a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world”

The Turtledoves brought by Mary and Joseph as a sacrificial offering would be needed no more. Had not God said in the prophets – “Loyalty is my desire, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings?” The artist depiction of the turtledoves is, of course, highly stylised – they sit quietly on the altar steps, symbols of purity and peace. The Temple sacrifices were far from peaceful. Leviticus in chapter 12: 6-8 and chapter 1: 14-17 tells us in lurid detail of the ghastly gory process. But so, too, was the crucifixion – the “once and for all offering for the sins of the whole world”

Unlike the crucifixion, the Temple sacrifices needed to be made again and again. They were as ineffective as they were unwanted. “Loyalty is my desire, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offering.”

“You see this child” said Simeon, “He is destined for the rising and falling of many and to be a sign that will be opposed.” In the original text the word used for “rising” is the same word used for resurrection. The implication is clear. The Messiah, this baby, recognised by Simeon as God’s promised Saviour, will be the means by which the world, we, will gain salvation. Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God saying “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

That your and my salvation might come about in this way is beyond our full comprehension. But we are not required to understand this miraculous act of God but simply to trust that “for us and for our salvation He came down from heaven.”

That He did so in this way, in this vulnerable self-giving way is both an indication and a guarantee of how much God loves us and how much He wants us to love Him in return.

Here we are at the heart of what the Incarnation means: God the creator and sustainer of all that is, the originator and architect of the universe, becomes one of us and in so doing draws us to Himself.

He stoops to share in our humanity that we might glimpse something of His divinity.

A final message from the painting: notice the heads of the principal characters, running from left to right with Mary's on the left, then Joseph's and finally Simeon's. They make a rising diagonal, a common artistic trait. But follow that rising line from left to right beyond Simeon's mitre and you see the tip of a candle. This baby is to become the light that enlightens the Gentiles.

Christ, the light of the world.