

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

Last year's Candlemas was a preacher's delight – my sermon, my words, were quoted and mulled over throughout the week in homes, in town, in the coffee shops and hairdressers of Richmond. Did you hear what Scott said on Sunday? Only what was *heard* was not quite what I had had in mind. I put too much stress on the word *very* when I read from our reading: Anna was in the Temple, Anna was 84 years old, Anna was very old. With apologies for those who I offended '84' is not very old?! And for the purposes of this year Anna is wise and mature and radiates beauty.

Anna is one part of the story that is part of the story of Candlemas. Our gaze has to be in several different directions on this feast of Candlemas. Each *normal* year many of us go to the great procession and hymn-fest at Ripon cathedral. But not this year. Candles, thousands of candles illuminate a building far bigger than this one. And lots of incense. A wider and older tradition is for people to bring their candles for the year ahead and have them blessed with the church candles, for without their light the cathedrals and churches and shops and homes would be dark. Some of you have admirably kept the lights alive in your Christmas decorations until this day.

Who is the focus of today's gospel story? The characters in today's play are Anna, Jesus, Joseph, Mary and Simeon. Joseph, as always, remains part of the background. Anna, a few years beyond middle aged, praised God and spoke of Jesus but the words *she* said are not written down. Simeon had his words written down and these are passed down to us: As he holds the baby Jesus he says 'Lord now let your servant depart in peace. For mine eyes have seen the salvation that you have prepared before the face of all people. To be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of your people Israel.' It is Simeon's delight-in-the-'light' that prompts the annual bringing of candles to be blessed and to be a blessing in every aspect of our lives. This long awaited meeting between Simeon and the Christ child is also known as the feast of the holy encounter. Before he would die Simeon has been told that his eyes would see and his hands would hold the saviour of the world.

Our last character is a new Mum who has brought her new born baby. Those fortunate enough to have a child in our world face a long series of pre natal and post natal meetings, checks, hospital visits, home visits, all to keep an eye on the welfare of the new mum and the new baby. Despite our cluelessness we avoided any great mishaps with our Alastair.

The nearest we got was when I was left in charge of one night shift. He had gone on to formula feed and the simple maths of 1 part water to 4 parts powder was I found to be less straight forward in the early hours of the morning. I did 1 part power and 4 parts water. Bottle 1 was consumed and Alastair still cried for more. Bottle 2 was consumed and Alastair cried for more. By bottle 3 his stomach wobbled like a weeble and the safer hands of his Mum had been roused from deep sleep.

Mary comes to be purified. Today is also known as the feast of the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Whilst we have pre-natal and post-natal checks Mary had an appointment at the Temple, 40 days after the birth of Christ. In this very different context and culture she had been considered unclean until this point. Had she given birth to a girl she would have been unclean for twice the length of time.

Whilst at the Temple an offering of thanks is made for the baby, a sacrifice of doves or pigeons for Mary and Joseph are poor. Today is also known as the feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ. So our gaze really is in several different directions in today's story as we also gaze backwards to Epiphany and Christmas, and forwards to Lent and Easter.

Four paradoxes from our story.

Firstly: Simeon has the Holy Spirit and comes from outside the Temple, the house of God, Mary has the Christ and comes from outside Jerusalem, the city of God.

Secondly: The adults see and hold and take care of the tiny baby. This baby takes care of the whole world.

Thirdly: Mary comes to go from unclean to clean. This won't wash. Her son will teach that no man made temple no church no city no ritual will remove the stain of sin. We cannot absolve ourselves of both blame and responsibility. Only Christ can do that in response to *our* sacrifice, a broken and contrite heart reprogrammed into love and service.

The growing number of students we are seeing each day at school assemble every morning outside school in their respective bubbles. Only when they are seen to wash their hands are they allowed in. Before their break, wash hands. After break, wash hands, and at lunch, and at the end of the day, wash hands.

Some years ago a girl returned on a Monday having been to a summer fair. She had striking and beautiful henna tattoos on both hands. On the Monday she was so proud of these pretty designs. By later in the week she was bored of them but could not wash them off. The next week she arrived back in school her hands in bandages. She had learnt that using neat bleach had made things worse, not better. The temple leaders would be challenged by Christ: You think you make things better but you are making things worse.

A fourth and final paradox. We want life, we desire life, our world is struggling to retain life, we grieve over the loss of life. We rejoice in the gift of this new day, a chance to share, to serve, to love, to create, to discover. Yet this version of life, this imperfect version, does not last forever. We arrange the funerals of others as others will arrange our own. In our story today it is Simeon who is closest to understanding the presence of Christ, and the hope and the gift of perfect eternal life. He presents a beautiful steadiness and readiness: Now Lord, I am ready, now Lord, I pray, may your servant depart in peace.

We are each called to relentless love, to serve in this time and in this place. We will be called, you will be called with Simeon and all the angels and saints to know that perfect reality. A place in which we know and hold Christ as perfectly as he already knows and holds us. Can I finish with a vision that I've shared once before? I am walking out of a deep and thick woodland. The going has been tough through the low branches and over roots and brambles. But now I am coming out from the edge of the woods into a vast plain of grass and bright, bright sunshine. The grass is vibrant green, subtle and easy to walk through. Ahead of me, the light seems to grow even lighter and brighter. Beside me on my left is a line of other people as far as the eye can see, they are also coming out of the forest and into the light. To my right is also a line of people continuing as far as the eye can see. We, we have arrived and it is wonderful. Just then, I catch sight, way down the line, a face I recognise, someone I know, but not someone I like, indeed quite the opposite, and I confess I am surprised. How did *he* get in here? I'm about to turn back and he notices me. On his face and by his expression I see that same astonishment. As he looks at me, he wonders 'How did *he* get in here'?