

A Reflection on the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

The Candlemas Gospel focuses on Jesus Christ as the one in whom the *Glory of God* has been made visible. In that sense, it is a Gospel which heralds our perception of what the whole creation will begin to look like when it has been ‘made new’ (cf 2 Corinthians 5.17; Revelation 21.5). But the Prophet Simeon moves directly on from this recognition to comment on how Jesus Christ will be *opposed* by those whose inner thoughts remain in darkness, and will be surrounded by *great turmoil* while the good and the bad are being separated from each other. With the evocative image of a sword which will pierce her heart, Simeon foresees all of the tension and conflict which Mary will witness when it culminates in the Passion of the Lord, and his death and burial. That is to say, Simeon sees and perceives in Jesus Christ two different perspectives. He can see the world *as it will become* when it is redeemed – which he describes in terms of the light of revelation and the Glory of God illuminating his people; but he sees it also *as it currently is* – torn, divided, conflicted; an arena within which the tension between good and evil is very real. To perceive things really as they *are* keeps Simeon grounded and realistic. But to see them as they *will be* enables him also to remain hopeful and open-hearted – and *both* are fundamentally important:



Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 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, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the

falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

Luke 2.27-35

The great spiritual teachers in the Christian tradition place a similar emphasis on recognising, beholding – taking seriously – both what *is* and what *is yet to come*. This is the content of our ‘spiritual life’ – to face the reality of our fallen nature, and that of the world around us, genuinely to recognise how serious and woeful the consequences are of human (and other) wilfulness, forcefulness, violence and greed, all of what is meant by the word ‘sin’. It *really matters*, and the effects are brutal and damaging. But *at the same time* we perceive the outlines of a humanity which not only *can be* but actually *is* restored and made new in Jesus Christ. The one perspective – here and now – enables us to avoid becoming *complacent*; the other – not quite here, but hereafter – enables us to remain *confident* and *hopeful*. It is not about wishful thinking, but about recognising the genuine significance of the Glory of God having come into the world in Jesus Christ, making good what is needful, but beyond our own strength. This double-perception, of what *is* and what *will yet be* – of *sight* informed by *insight* – is the real content of prayer and contemplation.

The same balance is there in the vision of the Prophet Malachi, which is given alongside the Candlemas Gospel on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple at the start of February. Malachi emphasises an image of the refiner’s fire which itself presupposes the double-perspective I have described. We would not think of the refiner’s fire at all unless we recognised first of all the existence of dross which needs to be consumed away; but the image makes sense only because we are confident that in the process of refinement, the precious metal will be made pure and radiant. We see what is and what will be at the same time, enabling us to be confident to risk allowing *our own selves* to be refined by the work within us of the Holy Spirit.

Thus says the Lord God: See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Malachi 3.1-3

May we allow God to continue this work of refinement within us.