

# “Surprising Peace in the Turmoil”

Luke 2:34 – 35

“Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the 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.”

## A Mother and a Son . . .

Let me start today’s sermon on a very personal note. On the 29 December 2023 I got a phone call I never expected, but one that I never want to receive again. My mother had died suddenly in the Bahamas. When I got the message, I put the phone down in disbelief. Roughly three weeks later I was burying her. The drama within me was real, the pain, the confusion, the loss, the unanswered questions were consuming in the weeks of preparing for the funeral. This was my one mother, and I was her one child . . . oops, I forget! I’m her second child, one of 5 children. But I’m the only one far away. But the strangest thing about this overwhelming and difficult time was when I got to the Bahamas and had to prepare for the funeral. There was only peace. On the day of the funeral, there was only peace. I did not feel that she had died, but that she was there. The weather even felt filled with a holy calm. I felt peace and rest, even in the midst of devastating loss.

## Mothering Sunday and Mid-Lent

I think there is something about the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent that brings us to this strange place, this unexpected place. Lent is a time of penitence, fasting, and facing the trials of life. We come to face ourselves in the wilderness of life, our greatest temptations, our deepest flaws. But, in the midst of this period we have a day when we think about loosening the grip of the heavy stuff, and allowing ourselves to experience peace, calm, breakthrough, and even praise and gratitude.

Today we observe two things. Firstly, it’s Mothering Sunday. It’s a time to remember our foundations, our Mother Churches, a time to come back home to where it all started and to where our roots are. It reminds us in the midst of the Lenten fast to come back to where we were first formed in the faith. For you, this might be the Halas team, or perhaps the Cathedral, or perhaps even a church far away.

It is also a time to have a break from the heavy fasting. This is also called ‘Laetare Sunday’, which is the fourth Sunday in the season of Lent, in the Western Christian liturgical calendar. Traditionally, this Sunday has been a day of celebration within the austere period of Lent. This Sunday gets its name from the first few words of the

traditional Latin entrance verse for the Mass of the day. Like my experience in the Bahamas, I had a break from the inner storm. The storm isn't over, but I had a chance to celebrate her life, and all that she was, and is, and remains to be with us and in us. Today we remember to break for a bit, to celebrate, to remember that there is joy and praise in the midst of the turmoil.

### **Jesus' Presentation in the Temple**

This brings us to our passage in the Gospel of Luke. This is the reading we had not too long ago for Candlemas. In these birth stories in Luke's Gospel, we see a lot of praise and hope and absolutely joy. But in Matthew's Gospel, we find stories of horror. Jesus' birth stories in Matthew's Gospel, particular Matthew 2, is particularly gruesome. There is Herod's trickery and plotting. There is infanticide (Herod ordered for boys under two years old to be killed). There is the Holy Family fleeing as refugees and asylum seekers to Egypt. The earliest story of Jesus is filled with trauma, pain, uncertainty.

But let's come back to the story of Jesus' presentation in the temple in Luke 2. It is not without its trauma either. Let's remember that Mary's child is out of wedlock. She faced a lot of stigma and shame. There is a lot of stress here. She is poor, owing to the fact that she and Joseph could not even offer what they should at that important time. While people usually offered a lamb, they could only afford a pair of turtledoves or a pigeon. Furthermore, Simeon makes this astonishing prediction to Mary:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Luke 2:34-35

There will be pain, to come. Sorrow surrounds Jesus. It also surrounds his mother. Here we are . . . a mother and a son, again. Amidst the joy, there is also sorrow. One would lose the other in time. In our alternative reading for today from John 19:25b – 27, Mary and company stand near the foot of the cross, watching the impending crucifixion of her Son!

### **Joy and Praise in the Midst of Pain**

But we know that while both passages are laced with pain, both Luke 2 and John 19, there is the persistent presence of joy. We cannot forget the praise in Simeon's voice. He had been waiting for this child all his ministry. He was on his way out. He got to see the great work that God would about to do in this child of trauma. In the same story Anna, who dedicated her life to prayer in the temple bursts out in praise.

In John 19 we know the end of the story. The end is not death, but resurrection. In the middle of the worst that can happen, God does the surprising thing of bringing about new life. Suffering, pain and death were never the end.

This Sunday we take a time to remember that despite the harshness of life, the turmoil of the Lenten period, there is a peace, a resting place, where we can have a moment to celebrate, and burst out in praise. It is Mothering Sunday, and Laetare, and both remind us to celebrate the foundation of our faith, and the deep truth of our lives – that God meets us in the wilderness, and when God is present, for a moment, we get to have peace, for a moment we get to praise, and for but a moment, we get to celebrate life.

Like me, like Mary, like Simeon and Anna, we get to celebrate life in the midst of death.

May you have a deep encounter with God in your Lenten journey.

Joy is deeper than trial.

God is bigger than our struggles.

Life is bigger than death.

Amen