

Dear Friends,

Luke 2: 21-25

Last time we looked at the story of the magi. That can be found in Matthew's gospel. Now we are going to cross back to Luke's gospel. He has stories to tell of the first days and the early years of Jesus.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph completed all the rituals that their religion required. So, when their child was eight days old, they had him circumcised and given the name Jesus. Then, forty days after the birth, the time came for what Luke describes as "their purification". The idea that childbirth makes a woman ritually impure is horrific to us but was widespread in the ancient world. According to the book of Leviticus the time of impurity lasted for forty days. The end of that period was marked by the woman making a sacrifice of a sheep as a burnt offering. If she could not afford a sheep, she could give two turtledoves or two pigeons instead. Mary and Joseph made the offering that was allowed for those who were poor. We see once again that Jesus makes his home amongst those who struggle to get by and make ends meet.

The ritual for purification is brought together with the ritual for the offering of the firstborn male child to God. This could be done with a local priest. The child would be offered to God and then bought back at a cost of five shekels. The offering of Jesus takes place not with a local priest but in the temple. There is no account of his parents buying him back. Here is a sign that Jesus is set apart for God's service. The next story will confirm this. When Jesus is twelve years old, he goes to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Passover festival. On their way home Mary and Joseph realise that Jesus is not with them or the rest of their companions. They return to Jerusalem and search for him for three days. They eventually find him in the temple having a conversation with the teachers. When his parents challenge him, Jesus says, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" Here is Jesus, in the temple, about the work of God. He is the servant of God, who is set apart for God's purposes.

While Jesus is being presented, two elderly people, Simeon and Anna are both also guided to be in the temple. Simeon is described as "righteous and devout". He is "looking forward to the consolation of Israel". This consolation would come when God brought in the world that sets this world right. For Israel that would include being liberated from the Romans who ruled over them and occupied their land. It would be a time when slaves were released; the oppressed would be set free; broken people would be mended; debts would be written off. It would, at last, be the time for the poor to hear good news. It would be a time when everybody would be given a clean sheet and would have the opportunity to start again. Their souls would be restored. They would be given clean hearts and renewed spirits. Simeon was not stuck in the past. He was filled with hope that he would not die until he had seen God's chosen one who would complete this work.

I love Simeon's positive attitude. I think he's an inspiration to us. We are going through traumatic times. What we used to know may be gone forever. But we too can live in hope. We can let go of the past and be confident that God will do a new thing. That's what Simeon does. Although he is old and close to death he is not preoccupied with the past and what has gone before. He is not filled with regrets or guilt about things that have taken place. He is not hungry for a return to old glories and things that used to be. Instead, he is looking forwards. He believes that God is only just getting started with the work of making all things new. He is confident that God has not finished with him but still has more to share with him.

On this day, Simeon is led by God to enter the temple. He sees parents with a child. He becomes aware that the moment that he has anticipated, the moment for which he has longed, has at last arrived.

God bless you,

Tony