**Feast of Candlemas (2020, Year A): Malachi 3:1-5, Luke 2**

We gather this morning to mark the end of the season of Epiphany, and the end of our long celebration of the incarnation: the mystery that Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, is God with us.

Luke offers us more glimpses than any other Gospel into the childhood of Jesus, leading us from Bethlehem to Jerusalem where Jesus is brought to the temple.

Today is a transition from one stage of Jesus’ life - centred on Bethlehem and Jerusalem - to the second, where we find Jesus north in his parents’ home of Galilee.

The essential background to the story of Jesus in the temple with his parents is two-fold and to be found in the Old Testament scriptures.

First, the ritual requirements in the Torah, the Jewish Law, which accompany the birth of a first son which we’ll return to.

Second, the importance of the temple to Jewish religious and cultural life in Jesus’ time.

The passage we heard earlier from the Old Testament book of Malachi indicates important aspects of the national life and concerns of Israel in the centuries leading up to Jesus’ birth. What was the state of the nation? What were the challenges, aspirations and hopes?

Malachi spoke in the time after Jesus’ ancestors had returned Israel after their long exile in Babylon. Much work has been undertaken to rebuild the nation, physically, culturally and spiritually. Jerusalem was the focus for this work, the temple especially,

A temple once wrecked and pillaged by the Babylonians was rebuilt and resumed its place as the heart of religious and social life. Sacrifices, prayers, rituals of cleansing, all that made for social cohesion and signified religious devotion had resumed and yet…

And yet something was lacking. Malachi’s prophesy indicates a sense that, though the temple is restored, the spiritual life of the nation has not recovered. There is a sense that God is distant; their worship is empty.

Malachi points to the disconnection between religious piety on the one hand, and social justice and righteousness on the other. The more superficial, outward trappings of being God’s people have been restored, but something is lacking.

Malachi longs for God to visit his people, his temple in conspicuous power and yet…*he knows one ought to be careful what one wishes for.*

His people long for a renewed sense of God’s presence and therefore their own importance, but do they know what they are asking?

Malachi sees that a visitation from God will mean painful correction, severe judgment and thorough refining. Not just of outward ritual but regarding motive, heart and relationship.

**If God is to come to his temple, what will God do?**

Malachi pulls no punches:

*“I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”*

God will set his face against those who are unfaithful, dishonest, oppressive.

God will oppose those who mistreat those with less power.

God will oppose those who push aside or indifferent to widows, to orphans,

to outsiders who seek refuge and asylum.

If we want to know what holiness in the sight of God looks like, there’s our list.

“We want God to come back to us!” Do you? well, be careful what you wish for.

In the UK in 2017, crime statistics indicated a spike in racially-motivated hate crime.

In 2018 and 2019, the UK saw a marked increased in anti-semitic abuse in public and online.

In January 2020, the UK parliament voted down legislation which would have would have guaranteed family reunion rights for unaccompanied child [refugees](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/Refugees).

In 2018 at least 83 people belonging the Windrush generation - legal, British citizens, were wrongly [detained](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_detention_in_the_United_Kingdom), denied legal rights, or threatened with [deportation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UK_immigration_enforcement#Deportation).

In 2019 Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon became the richest man in the world with an estimated personal wealth of $115 billion dollars. The same year a newspaper investigation revealed numerous cases where Amazon workers were left to suffer after sustaining workplace injuries, leaving them unable to work, deprived of income, and forced to fight for months to receive benefits and medical care. In the UK, according to the news outlet, one worker even had to be taken to hospital by an ambulance when they collapsed on the job.

*“I will be swift to bear witness against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”*

“We want our nation to be Christian again”, I’ve heard more than a few times over the last few years. Do we? Do we know what that means? It’s not about an identity we claim or a box on a census. It’s about what Malachi points to, what Jesus lived out.

What Malachi spoke out about, Jesus himself took up as his theme.

Jesus’ manifesto was to see righteousness flourish in Israel, not through sacrifice and ritual, but through compassion, justice, mercy.

So much for Malachi. What about Jesus in the temple, the little baby brought by Mary and Joseph in obedience to the law.

We may be familiar with Simeon and with Anna, but before we get to them, there are some significant details in Luke’s story.

Remember all that I’ve said about Malachi and God coming swiftly to his temple.

What happens when God does indeed come? What does that look like?

Well, first: it’s a small baby, not a mighty warrior. A small child in the arms of a young mother - not a royal servant or great retinue to be seen.

A baby in the arms of a poor, ordinary, young, bewildered mother.

***Yes, poor, and we know this because Luke knows exactly what clues to give us:***

What do Mary and Joseph offer as their sacrifice to God?   
Not a goat, a lamb or a bull, but two pigeons.

The law states clearly: forty days after a mother gives birth, she is to mark the end of her ritual uncleanness by bringing “a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove” but “But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons.” Mary didn’t have the means to offer the full sacrifice.

God comes to his temple as the son of a poor woman, just scraping by.

Not just a poor son of a poor woman. A poor northern boy. A family of relative outsiders, in Jerusalem for a time but soon returning time Nazareth up north where it’s grim.

Yes, really. “Could anything good come out of Nazareth?” so the saying went.

That’s the God who comes to his temple. A poor, helpless outsider. Jesus who would offer have nowhere to lay his head. Jesus who would be often rejected or ridiculed, shunned for not fitting in, not belonging.

The LORD has suddenly appeared in his temple. Who recognised him?

An old man and an old woman, near the end of their lives.

Simeon and Anna were both sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and dedicated to God through prayer.

Their eyes were longing to see God visiting his temple and bringing glory again to Israel.

I have a feeling, though, that they DID know what they were wishing for.

They knew that God coming to his people would be unsettling, divisive, challenging and painful.

Simeon dares to speak the truth, however uncomfortable it is for him to utter or for Mary to hear.

We’re familiar with Simeon’s initial words - they form the Nunc Dimittis which we sing every Evensong.

His next words pack a punch though:

***““This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”***

There it is. The truth of God with us, God in the flesh in his temple.

The truth is unsettling. Jesus will divide: not because he excludes or builds barriers between people and God but because he will do the very opposite.

Jesus in time will reveal a God who is far more hospitable than many can tolerate or believe.

Jesus will show that God stands with the outsider, the asylum seeker, the foreigner, and does not put up a barrier to keep them from God.

Jesus will speak out against indifference towards the poor, the widow, the orphan.

***What would he say today?***

Would he remind us that the kingdom of God is a universal kingdom without boundaries?

When God came to his temple in the flesh he was concerned with this: do these people worship in spirit and truth but words and deeds which are justice, honest, merciful, faithful, compassionate?

We stand at a crossroads as a country and, I believe, as a national Church.

Will we allow ourselves to be continually divided for the worst reasons?

We have a shared public life where truth and compassion, faithfulness and mercy have been pushed aside in favour of animosity, dishonesty, and exclusion.

I long, as I know many others do, for our Church to be a beacon, a light to illuminate the way ahead for our nation. We long for our Church to be fit to help us rebuild a sense of a common life and mutual respect in our nation.

That won’t happen without taking a long, hard look at ourself as a national Church, and each one of us who claim the name of Christian.

Malachi gives us a stark vision of what God opposes and what God is for.

Jesus Christ fleshed that out, literally, for us.

Are we prepared to hear the hard truth that Jesus speaks to us?  
Will we dare to take up the challenge to be the living temple of God, a temple within which God is pleased to dwell?

To be a light to the world?

Amen.