

## Unexpected Encounter – Candlemas January 2016

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5, Psalm 34, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:14-18

During the 2009 recession, I was given a free ticket to a Business seminar where a famous Australian was talking about how to grow your business. I didn't want to go but, well, it was free! Anyway, he was HOPELESS. I spent more time criticizing his dress sense (stripy tie, stripy suit and stripy shirt??), than listening to the seemingly endless stream of rubbish falling out of his mouth. BUT, afterwards, in the networking part of the day, by chance, I bumped into (literally) a local business coach who ended up changing my business and working practices forever – and got me through the recession! It was an unexpected encounter, not the sort I had planned, but a very important meeting of minds for my life and work.

Today in the Gospel, Mary and Joseph are at the Temple to present their first-born son and for Mary to be purified after childbirth, (which is, as we know ladies, UNCLEAN! A custom, incidentally, that is still offered in the Book of Common Prayer).

Mary and Joseph, who could only afford to make an offering of two birds, rather than the preferred sheep, arrived in the Temple to present baby Jesus to God and to receive Mary's ritual purification, but they were greeted, not by the expected priests and the business of the Temple, but by Simeon, an old blind man who took the child in his arms, and Anna, an eighty-four year old widow and prophet, who began praising God for the infant Jesus. A totally unexpected meeting: unexpected people in an unexpected place.

So important was this encounter with Simeon and Anna that Luke never describes the business they were there in the Temple for. The purification and cleansing is seen off in just one sentence, and the rest of the passage is taken up with this unexpected encounter.

To Simeon and Anna this was more than just an encounter, it was a time of revelation. They were both very old and had led long lives waiting for the promised Messiah. **Now** all of that was fulfilled, **now** they had seen Jesus, the infant who was, and who was to become, their Saviour. To these two old people was revealed the hope of God for the world. The Saviour talked about in Malachi - **See I am sending a messenger, to refine and purify, to bring justice, to end oppression, to sort out the wheat from the chaff....etc. etc.**

For Simeon and Anna – this was it! The revelation of God's very self was a cause

of great rejoicing. God had fulfilled their hope, their revelation was complete and they were (as they say these days) made up!

Simeon was so moved that he uttered his now famous words - that have become some of the best loved in the liturgies of the Church. **Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...**

Simeon could now let go of his long life in the fulfilment of God's promises having met his Saviour.

The prophetess Anna was praising God, knowing that her needs were met in Jesus, the redemption of Israel. Simeon also praised God for the glory of his coming to earth in this baby, but he knew prophetically what was to come when he alluded to the pain and suffering that was in store for Jesus the man. He spoke of the sword that would pierce and of the pain that would be inescapable.

Candlemas *is* that point where we stop thinking of the *baby* Jesus, and turn our thoughts to the *man* Jesus. From Christmas, and through Epiphany, we have thought about the baby Jesus and what it means for God to give something of God's very self to the world. Now it is time to move on and consider the grown up Jesus and the action of God in the world. This is summed up well in Hebrews: **He shared our flesh and blood to understand who and what we were and took death away from us.**

So what does this mean for us? So many things!

Having faith as strong as Simeon to wait on God

Having a sense of 'growing up' with Jesus, eating meat rather than drinking milk, sharing in the suffering of Christ, sharing in his death and resurrection

Having the guts to make use of 'unexpected encounters', to talk about our faith, to share our Christian values with the world around us

Having a sense of celebration like Simeon and Anna – to rejoice in the knowledge that we know our Saviour

Having the courage to open ourselves up and let Jesus into our everyday lives.

The psalmist puts this rejoicing so well:

**Lift up your heads, O gates and be lifted up, O ancient doors that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.**

So today as we celebrate a bitter-sweet, two sided, feast, we end our thinking of Jesus the boy and begin our thinking of Jesus the man: but along with that pain and suffering comes also the glory of Easter and the resurrection: truly the agony and the ecstasy, the victim and the victor, leading to yet another unexpected encounter – that encounter with the Risen Lord.