

Sermon St Stephens Rochester Row 2.02.2020

+ It is a delight to be with you this morning, thank you to Graham for his Invitation to preach and thank you too, for your welcome. Not only for your welcome today but for your welcome on the other occasions over the last four years or so that we have been occasional worshippers here.

It is wonderful to find a parish church which works, as a parish church, really serving the community and welcoming local people, and not so local people. It is wonderful too, to be able to come here on weekdays for morning and evening prayer, to know that that daily pattern of prayer, which should happen in every parish church in the land, and which worshipping communities, right back to the Temple in Jerusalem have offered, continues here. Somehow, here you feel you are on solid ground, spiritually.

In our gospel reading this morning, from St Luke, we heard the story of Mary and Joseph, doing what was expected of them, taking the infant Jesus to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to offer a sacrifice as prescribed by the Law: “ a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons”. Luke was very keen to show that everything had been done properly, that here, with this child you could be sure, you were on solid ground.

There are four characters in this story, not counting Our Lord Himself, of course. There is Mary and Joseph, Anna, and then there is Simeon. There was a great sense of expectation in Israel at the time. The Messiah was expected. Simeon was one of those who not only anticipated this great event, he spent the whole of his time praying about it, you might say he obsessed about it. He had had a promise from God, maybe it was a deep feeling, a sense of reassurance that he would not die until he had seen what he calls, “ the consolation of Israel” which is another way of saying, the Messiah. Simeon reveals that this baby, this Jesus who had come so that His parents could offer the prescribed sacrifice was, indeed, the Messiah. He utters the famous words of the Nunc Dimitis “Lord now lettest Thou thy Servant depart in peace...” and he makes a prophecy about the sort of Messiah this baby is to be. Not the sort of national hero looked for by many in Israel, not political/military

leader but a “..sign that will be spoken against...” and he says that a sword will pierce Mary’s heart too. So he prophecies Our Lord’s suffering.

Simeon’s message to you and to me is that we can trust that this child is the Messiah. In Him, we are on solid ground. Feast days, such as this Feast of the Presentation, highlight to us an aspect of our faith, they remind us of things that the Church teaches year in year out, and which we may have heard many times before. They also help us to centre spiritually on one or other aspect of faith, they re-ignite our own spiritual understanding. I believe that we all have spiritual understanding and all have had spiritual experiences, which we frequently don’t recognise or value.

After many years working as a parish priest and hospital chaplain, I am convinced that nearly everybody must have had spiritual experiences. They may not have the words to describe them as spiritual experiences, but that is what they are. The experience may be a sense of peace, perhaps a feeling of stillness in this Church, or maybe a feeling of God’s presence in Holy Communion. Someone might think that they have not had what they would call a spiritual experience, but I bet they have, whether in Church or anywhere else. In fact, saying “thankyou” to God for a lovely view or a happy event is to acknowledge that God as creator, is the giver of the experience, and that therefore looking at a view or experiencing happiness is in a sense, a spiritual experience. One spiritual experience points to the significance of other spiritual experiences.

Simeon’s spiritual experience in recognising the baby Jesus as God’s Messiah Points to the authenticity of our own spiritual experience of Jesus. Here, in this child, worshipped in this Church, above all in the Holy Eucharist but also in morning and evening prayer, and in loving service, serving Christ in others, we have found authenticity, we are on solid ground.

Have you noticed how often in interviews on the television or radio, and on social media, politicians say, “I have been very clear that”. I am not sure that anything is very clear in politics. We may feel that we have not always been very clear about what we believe. We might be a bit foggy about our faith from time to time. Simeon offers us a bit of clarity. He shows us that this child

is the Messiah, the Son of God. So Simeon is telling us that we can be confident in our faith in Jesus, in Him we are on solid ground.

Simeon spent all of his life searching for the Messiah, and his spiritual search was fulfilled when he met Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Simeon's spiritual journey authenticates our own spiritual journey. It confirms that when we come to this Church, Sunday by Sunday, may be because here, we have always found a spiritual foundation for our lives, or may be because we have friends here or we are looking for answers to questions about life, or because we are happy or sad or for whatever reason, it confirms that coming here we have come to the right place. You may have picked up the phrase by now, here we are on solid ground.

I have mentioned our recent political debates in this country. It has been hard to discern where the facts are in the debate. We know that Simeon's prophecy about Jesus, became a fact. The prophecy that He would be a suffering Messiah, came true. That He did, indeed suffer. He came to show us the truth about God, that God is truth, and came, in Christ to be with us, alongside us, on our side in Jesus. When we worship here, He is alongside us, through the life of this Church and Our Lord's presence, in worship here, in the way people are valued as members of the Body of Christ. That is the sort of community St Stephens and any Church is called to be, so that we can all feel that we are on solid ground.

Sermon by Rev'd David Hobden

At St Stephen's Rochester Row on 2nd February 2020