

Sunday 2 February 2025
Presentation of Christ/Candlemas

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Malachi 3.1-4
NT: Hebrews 2.14-18
Gp: Luke 2.22-40

What do we bring today? What do we offer?

This week, we must offer our bewilderment and distress. It has obviously been a traumatic week for the church and for the Diocese of Liverpool in particular. Many of us will be feeling hurt and distressed, especially those for whom these events are a painful reminder of their own traumas. We will have unanswered questions. We need to take care of one another and continue to hold all those affected by this in our prayers.

What do we bring today? What do we offer?

We must offer our commitment to a church that is safe, healing and honest. In a storm of media reports and speculation, it is too early to make judgements. But there are some principles we can affirm. First, we must reflect on our processes for handling complaints and allegations in the church. At the moment they do not seem to be serving either victims or those against whom allegations are made. They are neither rigorous nor humane. We need to continue to work for a church where all feel welcome and safe. The voice of victims and survivors must be heard, whistle-blowers need protection. That is not at all to prejudge any allegations that have been made, especially against the Bishop of Liverpool. They must be investigated with absolute impartiality. But there can be no culture of silence or deference or any sense that complaints will not be taken seriously.

What do we bring today? What do we offer?

Above all, we bring ourselves. We are here this morning. We are here for the eucharist, a word which means thanksgiving. It might seem hard to feel gratitude at a time like this. The wider world can feel broken and lost, while the church itself offers no sanctuary or relief from all too human failings. But we are here nevertheless, here to offer thanks. How do we do that, when it feels like our hands are empty?

Remember our gospel reading today. We follow Mary and Joseph into the temple. They are following the law, which says that there must be an offering given for every first-born child. So, they bring the child Jesus to the priests, along with the birds for sacrifice. And then something remarkable happens. As first Simeon and then Anna greets the child, it becomes clear: the real offering is not the unwilling animals, but the child himself. The child of promise. The child of miracle.

This is a strange and wonderful offering. It is, first of all, simply a thanksgiving for a child. In a similar way, we are blessed today to celebrate the baptism of Finn. It is a reminder of all that we can be grateful for in the gift of life. For new hope, new eyes to see the world. A new adventure of grace. Baptism reminds us that the springs of life are in the heart of God and they are always fresh. Whatever happens, that life pours out and can be renewed in every one of us.

But as well as being a thanksgiving for a child, it is also something more. It is that moment where we take the plunge. When we step off the edge of life as usual. Where we enter the deep waters and our life is joined to God's.

It sounds daunting; but we never do it alone. In Jesus Christ, God goes before us, into those same deep waters of life and death. The child is God's promise, God's miracle, God's own self: sharing our life. Taking the plunge with us.

The God whom heaven and earth could not contain, was contained in Mary's womb. Now Mary comes to the temple. And, as she did in the stable, she plays the role of the priest: she holds the very life of God in her hands. God comes into the temple, not in might and rage, but in humility and helplessness. Needing his mother's arms to carry him – as, in many depictions of the aftermath of Jesus' death, Mary carries his broken body.

There is beauty and pain in this image. The offering Mary brings reveals that God is the living gift of love. God offers himself to us and with us. When our gifts falter, when it feels that our springs run dry, then we can remember that we are part of something bigger: a river of grace, compassion and healing that never stops flowing.

When Simeon spoke to Mary, his words were hardly comforting. The child she carried would be the centre of whirlwind of conflict and opposition. He would be a sign of contradiction, a 'No' spoken to the cruelty of the world. He would be hurt, and a sword would pierce her own heart.

So: our Lady stands with us in heartbreak and sorrow, in the times when events seem to batter us into the ground. She stands with us, prays for us and helps us to make even these difficult things part of what we offer to God.

What do we bring today? What do we offer?

Ourselves, our life, all that we are. But we do not do this alone. We do it because God offers himself, his life, all that he is to us. We talk of God as powerful and great; but God is so much more than this. God has no ego to defend, no territory to police. God does not dominate, control, abuse or silence. God is great by being small enough to enter every heart, every hand.

So: you do not have to come to the Eucharist with anything but yourself and honesty about who you are and what you feel. Here, we step into that river, that never ceasing flow of gifts. In Christ, God embraces every part of our humanity. Not just the nice bits, but all of it. That never means tolerating abuse or turning a blind eye to injustice. Those things must be named and challenged. There must be policy and process, because these are not just bureaucracy but guardrails. They are ways of holding to human dignity, to transparency and to fairness in a fallen world.

It can feel like a hard path to walk today. But it can be walked because Jesus does so. He opens the way. He is the way. As the letter to the Hebrews states, he did not come to help angels but us. And 'he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.' His offering takes all our small, broken offerings, and makes them one whole, perfect sacrifice.

Candlemas comes as the first signs of spring begin to show. Even though we are still in winter, the greening of the earth begins. And it reminds us that the 'freshness deep down things' is still alive; it is in darkness that life is seeded, in darkness that the stars shine. A light to enlighten all people.

I am grateful that we have a baptism this morning to remind us that we are invited to be one with God, in the depths and the heights, in the dark and the light. Baptism is the seal of God's Spirit: the sacrament that assures us that God never leaves us. Finn comes at the start of his adventure, dependent on his parents and godparents and on the whole, imperfect community of the church. But also dependent, in a way that will last his whole life, on the God whose love never fades or wavers. We all share that with Finn.

As we pray for Finn, we pray for one another and for the church. We pray the church may be renewed as a sign of hope and healing in our world. But come what may, we give thanks: that we do not have to wait to be finished, or perfect, for God to sweep us up into the river of grace. Always, already, we are loved.

What do we bring? Our need, our questions, our gifts, our joys, our hurts. What do we offer? Hearts ready to receive all that God offers to us. And that is always more than enough.

Fr Steven Shakespeare