

Seeing the Savior

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her

marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

In the Jewish tradition, parents deliver their sons to the temple at the age of eight days for circumcision. This ritual, called a *bris*, which means “covenant,” solidifies the identification of the child with Judaism. Why eight days? In the Hebrew creation stories, the work of creation lasted seven days, so the eighth day signifies the conclusion of the child’s transition from the realm of the metaphysical to physical. This event suggests that, even in that moment of physicality, the child is reinvested in the faith. In other words, on the eighth day when the child becomes fully human, he or she is not complete until that moment when the child is identified with the faith.

Luke’s Gospel this morning records that moment, the day that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple. Luke speaks in elliptical and euphemistic language to describe the scene, saying only that “the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law.” But we understand what is happening here: the *bris* and the identification of the child Jesus with Judaism.

Why should we care? We inhabit a tradition that, although it is descended from this child, no longer associates itself with the specific rituals of Judaism. With his radical teaching that love transcends law, Jesus himself broke with the slavish legalism propagated by the Jewish leaders of his day, and the apostles also liberated the early followers of Jesus from many of the Levitical proscriptions about diet and behavior.

We no longer worry too much about eating pork or the interbreeding of cattle or wearing garments of mixed fabric – wool and silk, for example, or cotton and polyester.

So it would be easy for us to shrug off today's Gospel, at least the initial verses. Why should we care that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple at the age of eight days?

It's important, I think, for a couple of reasons. First, it roots Jesus himself in the Judaic tradition. And we must never forget that. Jesus never forgot that. He understood himself as part of the "house and lineage of David," very much in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Even though his teachings would forever alter the relationship of his followers to Judaism, Jesus stood foursquare within that tradition.

Jesus' appearance in the temple, however, also speaks to the importance of ritual and identification with tradition. We live in an age and a culture that disdains ritual or anything that smacks of formality. Everyone wants to be a free agent, unattached to anything that might obligate us or tie us down. One of the things that I love about the Episcopal Church is that liturgy and ritual lie at the center of our common life. In that way, we are countercultural; we stand against the prevailing currents.

The visit of Jesus to the temple attests to the importance of tradition and ritual.

But the second part of today's Gospel is even more compelling. After Jesus and his parents arrive at the temple, they were greeted by Simeon and by Anna, two older members of the community. Unfortunately, Luke doesn't tell us much about Anna, except for the fact that she had a brief married life and then many decades as a

widow. Both Simeon and Anna, however, had been anticipating the arrival of the messiah, and both acknowledged Jesus as that messiah.

Luke says a bit more about Simeon. He writes that the old man took Jesus “in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’” That declaration seems to have taken Jesus’ parents by surprise, for Luke tells us that “the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.”

My guess is that neither Anna nor Simeon arrived at the temple that morning expecting to see the long-awaited messiah. But that’s the beauty of the occasion. All of the parties came that day to fulfill their ritual obligations. And, in the midst of the commonplace, something extraordinary happened. Anna and Simeon cast their eyes on the child, the messiah. Mary and Joseph caught a glimpse of the greatness that would be the destiny of their son.

From time to time in our liturgical life we celebrate the Song of Simeon in today’s Gospel as the *Nunc Dimittis*, a rendition of the words of Simeon when he saw the infant Jesus. It goes like this:

Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever.

So it was on that day in the temple.

Jesus comes to us in unexpected ways – in the manger, beside the Sea of Galilee, on the cross, walking on the road to Emmaus. But he also comes to us in the commonplace, in the midst of our rituals, our everyday life. Just as Anna and Simeon did not know that they would encounter the messiah that morning in the temple, so too we don't know where or when we will encounter Christ.

It may be at work or at home or in transit between the two. It may be here at church in the midst of our ritual life. A word or a gesture in the celebration of the Eucharist. An expression of concern or friendship in the saying of the peace or at coffee hour. Maybe even a moment in the sermon when we understand God in a new way or apprehend Jesus through fresh eyes.

Jesus comes to us in the commonplace and sometimes, as for Simeon and Anna, at unexpected moments. Let us never forget the role of ritual and liturgy in pointing us in the right direction, in preparing us to see Jesus, wherever he may be found – in the activity of our everyday lives, in the workplace or at play, or here at Christ Church as we participate in our common life.

May we all say, in the words of Simeon, “these eyes of mine have seen the Savior.”

First Sunday of Christmas

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Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut