

St. George, Jesmond, Newcastle
29th January 2017 8am, 9.30am, 11.30am
Year A FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION.
Christopher Wardale

On Christmas Eve I did an extraordinary thing. – do you remember Christmas Eve? It seems a long time ago; the world has of course packed up Christmas long ago – Christmas is just so last year! But on this Feast of the Presentation, the very last gasp of the Christmas season, we have to backtrack to Bethlehem and to the night before the birth of Jesus. On Christmas Eve at 4pm at the flower stall at the top of Northumberland St. I bought 3 things – some holly with berries on it, some mistletoe and some Lincolnshire daffodils. It seemed a bizarre thing to do in the early but by then dark evening. To buy symbols of birth, symbols of death and symbols of resurrection.

In the dark night before Christmas a child was born. A light came into the darkness of the world and the darkness of the world has never overshadowed that light. Shepherds heard the good news, they heard angels sing and they left their flocks and went to find the child in a shed at the back of the pub.

Far away Wise people saw a star and wondered about it. They left their books and they too went travelling following the star until it came to Bethlehem.

The shepherds had to do a bit of searching to find the child. The angel didn't give them instructions on their ovine Sat Nav. The Wise persons got somewhat confused and went to Jerusalem and had that awkward meeting with horrid Herod.

But travelling they went and then they all went home again, changed people. All the people who had packed out Bethlehem also went home but they knew that something momentous had happened. They too were changed people. And I hope we all went travelling to Bethlehem; I hope we looked for the light, and listened for the cry of that new born child. I hope we went back home changed people. Christmas is not just the old story that we re-enact each year, however traditional we like it to be. It is a yearly journey of discovery. We have to find the child again, we have to discover the child anew, we have to discover that child again within ourselves and sometimes we do it in strange ways.

I bought on Christmas Eve some holly with red berries on it – and I bought some mistletoe – it was a bumper season for both. Old symbols, Christianised symbols from ancient pagan histories re used by the Church. They tell of birth. They tell of the blood and discomfort of birth, they tell of the sharpness of birth, they tell how birth may be in a strange place with only strangers to offer shelter and welcome. They tell a very down to earth story rather than a pie in sky fantasy many would make of the Incarnation of Jesus. And the holly tells how the blood would not stop – the berries remind us of Jesus' circumcision, that first blood-letting that made him part of the Jewish faith and family – and it reminds us that the story continues – the blood will be flow again – on the Cross. The sharp prickle of the holly leaf reminds us of the sharp pains of birth for Mary then and today of the words that Simeon says to her that a sword will pierce her heart – that in the end she will be only person who will know the complete earthly life of Jesus from his conception, to holding him in her arms after birth and then holding in her arms his dead body as the night falls at the end of Good Friday.

We are in a continuing story and we have to be sharply aware that the story of Jesus is a continuing one – not a series of separate, unrelated events and festivals. Christmas is part of Good Friday and Easter just as they are part of Christmas. And today is the day we remember the joined up writing-ness of the Jesus story.

Like the Magi, the shepherds and the travellers to Bethlehem for the census, the Holy Family are on their way home – in Luke's version they are going back to Nazareth – and the first stop on the way is to the Temple in Jerusalem – to do for the child what is required by the law – both secular and religious. They do what we do for our own children, we do what was done for us not long after our birth – under the law which we inherited - that each birth has to be registered. Jesus' name was entered into the roll of the living, in the roll of being a born Jew, in the roll of belonging to a particular nation, with the names of his parents and birth place. And they do this in the Temple, repository both the ancient and new records of nation and of a faith, Mary and Joseph make a sacrificial offering in thanksgiving for the birth of their first born. Perhaps all they could afford were the two pigeons – but it was enough – the law and requirements of Moses were fulfilled and then extended in the extraordinary words of Simeon and Anna.

Perhaps for the very first time as we join them in the temple in Jerusalem today for this Feast of Presentation do we hear with Mary and Joseph just who this child is, what this child will become, what this child will do, and what promise and potential lies within this child – and like Mary and Joseph we are probably knocked sideways when hear that this child is not just for Christmas but for life and eternity.

On this Feast day, at the end of the 40 days we now keep for the Christmas season, we are at a turning point. Bethlehem, for us as for them, is behind us – we have but the last glimpse today – for we are moving on.

The work of God in the Incarnation of his Son comes into the world in the blood of human birth and will end with human blood on the Cross. But this cross is the new key that will open the gate of new life. The journey is not backwards to Eden. It is forwards to whatever God has, in his love, got in store for us.

On the feast of the Presentation we stand at an enormously important turning point in our pilgrimage.

We know where we have been – we have been to Bethlehem – and we know where we are going – we are going to Calvary and we are going to an empty tomb in the darkness before the dawn of Easter Sunday. In the darkness we went to find a new born child – in the darkness of a Friday afternoon we shall watch a man die – in the darkness before dawn on a Sunday morning we shall go to find a newly risen saviour.

We stand in the Temple with the Holy Family as they go home. We catch with them the last glimpse of Bethlehem, We catch with them the wonders of promise in the words of an old man and an old woman; we glimpse in those words the first sign of the cross. We know where we have been – we now know where we are going.

And so on they going on their journeying - they go home. The child disappears for the next 30 years. Only Luke has him re-appearing briefly for his bar-mitzvah at the appropriate age. We hear nothing of the other children, we hear little more of Joseph. There is mostly silence until Jesus comes to meet John the Baptist at the River Jordan.

In the strange sequence of the Church's telling of the Jesus story we have already been there, to the River Jordan for his baptism, for his change of life experience. We are already travelling with the adult Jesus. Over the next few weeks we shall watch and wait with newly called disciples and with crowds who hang on his words and know their power to change. They will watch his actions and be amazed, as will we. In four and half weeks' time, we shall catch up with that baptism story, as we go into the wilderness with Jesus to watch and wait as we engage on the long and often painful and puzzling journey of Lent.

But we know where we are going, even if with uncertainty the exact route and we still have to get to know yet our new guide. We do not know yet by what scenic route Brian Hurst may lead us on our way forward, or what he wants particularly to show us

But, by whatever route and in whoever's guiding company we shall come, with the reminder of the daffodils I bought on Christmas Eve, to the glories and the wonder of Easter. And even that, as we know, is not the end of the journey but a new beginning and as the saying goes – we shall cross that bridge when we get there.

So for the moment, on this Feast of the Presentation, like the Holy Family we look backwards for the last glimpse of Bethlehem, and like Jesus we catch the first glimpse of the cross. The story moves on, we move on, our pilgrimage of faith moves on.

The candles we have lit, and will light again at the end of the service today, remind us of the light of Christ, the hope of Christ and the promise that is Christ; the icon of hope that we hold reminds of the help that is available if we are but humble enough to ask for it; that icon of hope are the words of Simeon in the Nunc Dimittis have become the words of daily Evening Prayer. In the darkness of the world, in our own dark times, the light shines. We have travelled to find the Christ, we are travelling with Christ to hear his words, we shall travel to watch him die and with the whole company of heaven we shall know of his Resurrection and the gifts of God's Holy Spirit. And now we must turn to look forwards and not just looking back over our shoulders.

Amen