

Candlemas 31 January 2009

In the five years I've been at St Paul's I've used a lot of poetry – in my sermons and in special service liturgies. I'm sure you've noticed as well that I've often used the so-called metaphysical poets such as John Donne, George Herbert and Andrew Marvell.

One of the literary devices used by these metaphysical poets is a thing called a conceit, which is a far fetched comparison or an extended simile or metaphor. Perhaps the most famous one is in the poem, *The Flea* by John Donne where speaker tells his beloved to look at the flea that is before them. For the flea, he says, has sucked first his blood, then her blood, so that now, inside the flea, they are mingled; and that mingling cannot be called "sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead." The flea has joined them together in a way that is more than they are doing. This poem uses the image of a flea that has just bitten the speaker and his beloved to sketch an amusing conflict over whether the two have premarital sex. The speaker wants to, the beloved does not, and so the speaker, cleverly uses the flea, in whose body his blood mingles with his beloved's, to show how innocuous such mingling can be—he reasons that if mingling in the flea is so innocuous, sexual mingling would be equally innocuous, for they are really the same thing.

Now, perhaps the idea of premarital sex in this poem does not shock us as much as it might have our ancestors. Most probably we are more appalled at the lack of hygiene that allows a flea to jump around between these two people so easily!

But all this is a matter of context. John Donne lived from 1572 till 1631 and was Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London. Although he lived over 30 years before the Great Plague and Great Fire of London in 1665-66 I'm pretty sure the flea, which was the vector of the plague, was already openly spreading the disease.

This morning in our worship we have used poetry and prose in hymns, canticle and psalms [as well as in the poem that makes up the words of the choir anthem that we hear later.] I would like to suggest that some of these are to a certain extent conceits but like John Donne's *Flea* we must look upon them in their context in order for us to get full value from them.

Today is the feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple which commemorates a specific event in Christ's human life. Ancient Mosaic law required that newborn male children be presented in the Temple to be dedicated to God. According to Leviticus the mother was considered to be unclean after the birth. After a male child's circumcision on the 8th day the mother was still required to remain in ceremonial isolation for another 33 days. At the end of that period she was supposed to go to the Temple to render a sacrifice for her purification. So Luke tells us in this morning's gospel that it was "time for their purification according to the law of Moses." What is interesting is that Luke makes the act of purification relevant to both Mary and Jesus by combining both the purification of the mother and the presentation of the male child into one event.

The requirements for Presentation of an infant, however, were very different from the requirements for the purification of a mother. According to Exodus 13 all firstborn males belonged to God and so all baby boys had to be dedicated to God. The law actually specified that first born male animals were to be sacrificed to God. But first born male humans were to be redeemed in other words brought back to God. The laws governing the purification for mothers after childbirth specified that a sacrifice had to be made of a year-old lamb and a pigeon or a dove. But the law also allowed for the substitution of two pigeons or two doves for people who were too poor to afford to sacrifice a lamb. So by Mary's sacrifice Luke has told us that she belonged to the poor classes.

It's also interesting to note that Luke describes the presentation of Jesus at the Temple as a dedication to the service of God, which is reminiscent of Samuel's dedication in the Old Testament. The first thing Luke describes in the Temple is Simeon's encounter with the infant Jesus. Simeon is described as being both religious and devout. Furthermore, we're also told that "the Holy Spirit was upon him" and that Simeon had been looking for the "consolation of Israel" All these terms are used to refer to the Messiah. So you can see how the "conceit" is

creeping in to this Gospel reading. Although we are hearing about the presentation of a male child, because of these images and symbols we know it is a special child.

On the day when Jesus was presented at the Temple Simeon was led by the Spirit to come to the Temple. With what could only be Spirit-given insight Simeon recognized the child as the one for whom he'd been looking and waiting his whole life. And after taking the child up in his arms, Simeon blessed God and spoke the words, which have become the beloved canticle we call the Nunc Dimittis a metricated version we sang as our gradual hymn.

This ancient hymn is a really pastiche of saying from the prophet Isaiah, but through them Simeon identifies the child Jesus as the Christ - the anointed one. Looking into the face of the infant Jesus Simeon says that his eyes have seen the salvation that God has prepared in the presence of all peoples. This salvation, this Jesus, he says, is both "light for revelation to the Gentiles as well as for the glory to your people Israel." And then after blessing both parents Simeon tells Mary that Jesus would be the crucial point of decision for many people in Israel. Following an old Eastern custom of foretelling the fate of the child Simeon predicted the sorrow of the Mother and told Mary that a sword would also pierce her soul. And so through Simeon's words, Luke was able to indicate to his readers that sacrifice would be the end result of the life of this special child.

And then....as if to underscore the very special nature of the child, Luke described the appearance of the Prophetess Anna who was 84 years old and lived in the Temple worshipping through prayer and fasting day and night. After only 7 years of marriage Anna had been widowed. Her decision not to remarry at a time and in a culture where women had no legal standing of their own was seen as evidence of her piety. Luke tells us that when Anna saw Jesus she began to talk about the child to everyone who was looking for the "redemption of Jerusalem" another term which refers to the coming of the Messiah. And so in this way she confirmed the witness of Simeon who had first proclaimed the special nature of this infant.

Perhaps the most important conceit for us to notice in this gospel is the fact that it's primary emphasis isn't on the dedication of Jesus to God but rather on God's affirmation about who Jesus was through the mouths of Simeon and Anna. Undoubtedly there were many other people who were present in the Temple that day; people who saw nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing more than a baby being presented. But Simeon and Anna did see something more. They recognized the Lord's Christ in that 40-day-old baby. And that points the conceit back towards us. Have we understood it for what it is? Do we see the symbolism employed by Luke merely as unimportant detail in the life story of Jesus? Do we fail to see the presence of the grace of God in our own lives? Are we like those others in the temple unaware of God's presence?

Many thousand of Pilgrims would have made their journey up to Jerusalem, like Mary Joseph did with their son, Jesus. Perhaps as Mary and Joseph made their way up they sang Psalm 24 that we used earlier. This is a favourite Psalm of mine - can't put my finger on quite why but I certainly love to sing it. It could in fact be divided into three part and some commentators think it is also a pastiche of verses of other psalms merely placed together to form Ps24. Verse 1 and 2 acknowledges God as the creator of all things. Verses 3 to 6 asks and answers the question who shall ascend the hill of the Lord or stand in God's holy place iow the temple. Then verse 7 to 10 seems to be an acclamation to the beauty, strength and eternalness of the temple. Three diverse sections but they can be blended into one psalm. Here the concept of a conceit comes into play again.

Section one acknowledges God as creator of all that is - you, me and, more significantly, all those who want to make their way up the hill of the Lord. Section two is as if the assembled pilgrims have halted and are awestruck with the magnitude of holiness they see in the temple ahead of them. So a priest asks and perhaps another answers who is righteous enough to ascend the hill of the Lord. With the preliminaries complete the great procession continues onwards and upwards. On reaching the temple an antiphonal song of triumph is sung between the Levitical choir and the pilgrims. Verse 9&10.

What has this psalm got to do with the Presentation of Christ in the temple you may ask? I would like to push that conceit idea and see each of us as pilgrims to God's Holy Temple – whatever form that holy temple may take in your own life. We too have been presented there; we too are present there – like Simeon and Anna. So I ask again, do we see the presence of the grace of God in our lives or are we like those others in the temple blissfully unaware of God's presence?

If we are aware, we like Simeon can "go in peace" for our eyes have seen the salvation.

In the words of 2nd verse of the anthem we will hear during communion:

Help now thy servants, gracious Lord,
That we may ever be
As once the faithful Simeon was,
Rejoicing but in Thee;
And when we must from earth departure take,
May gently fall asleep and with Thee wake.

The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the temple carries with it so many symbols so many images, so many metaphors and similes that for me it becomes a conceit of faith – an extended far-fetched comparison between ourselves and the many pilgrims making their way to the hill of the Lord, between ourselves and Simeon and Anna; between ourselves and the Baby Jesus being presented to God; and an opportunity for us to remember that our own eyes have seen the salvation, which the Lord has prepared.

Prayer:

Lord, how shall we pass through the everlasting doors and approach your holy presence, for we are not clean of hands or pure in heart. We have lifted up our soul to false things and failed in our promises. How could we abide on your holy hill and carry home blessings from you? But the gates lift up their heads, and the King of Glory passes through. May we enter with him, made clean by his goodness, made new by his love. Take us with you. Lord Jesus, that we may tread the eternal ground and worship in the beauty of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen