

Address from Ash Leighton Plom

Have you ever seen those optical illusions, like the one that looks like a duck facing to the left, or a rabbit facing to the right?

People use them to show perceptions are easily mistaken.

As far as we know from that reading from Luke today, all that anyone else perceived when Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple was just a young couple presenting their baby in the way that 1st Century Jewish people probably did all the time. Some days, there might have been a queue of such families coming to fulfil this Old Testament law which Leviticus 12 sets out: “A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth... is to bring to the priest... a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove... If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons”. From this, we know that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were a poorer family, then – did you catch that they brought two pigeons, not a lamb? But that's all most onlookers likely saw: an ordinary family, fulfilling the Law.

But unlike these other onlookers, Simeon and Anna, two older people, saw what was really going on. Where everyone else just saw a typical poor couple with a baby, Simeon and Anna recognised the baby as God incarnate.

So, today, let's look at Simeon and Anna for a moment. Firstly, they, not the temple priests or the teachers of religion, are the models for us in this incident as Luke records it. *They're* the ones who recognise Jesus, and they're the ones who testify about him to others. There would have been priests and religious scholars right there in the temple courts, but it's Simeon and Anna who noticed Jesus, and who immediately set about telling others about him, too.

This pattern, of ordinary faithful people recognising the Lord and sharing him with others, seems authentic to me. I've been reading about the spread of Christianity in the first few centuries, and a common theme there, too, is that most of the people who told their family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, and so on about Jesus were not priests or teachers of religion, but normal folk who knew the Lord and loved him so strongly they had to share him with those in their networks. So, the faith spread as it does today, through family, friendship, business, and similar networks, by people simply sharing what they've noticed God doing in and around them.

Some time in the last hundred or so years, a myth grew up in some circles which suggested that only ‘professional’ Christians, priests and other church leaders, were allowed to share the faith with words, while the majority of Christians were only allowed to express their faith through prayer, volunteering, and charitable giving. But this isn’t a situation Simeon or Anna would applaud, and it hasn’t been Christian practice for most of Church history.

The ‘*Talking Jesus*’ research, published in 2015 by the Church of England and partner organisations, points out that just 1% of non-Christians even know a priest or a church leader, but many more know Christian friends, family, colleagues and neighbours. As with Simeon and Anna, and believers throughout history, the responsibility and joy of making Jesus known to others belongs to all of us.

But let’s note that Simeon and Anna’s readiness to recognise Christ and make him known didn’t appear from nowhere. For example, I wonder if their understanding and insight into what God was doing when they saw Christ arose from the fact that their lives were deeply shaped by faithful prayer and worship? They knew God well enough that they recognised him when they met him incarnate, and they loved him so much that they had to tell about him to everyone around them.

So, let’s end by exploring what the good news is we have to tell. On the one hand, Simeon and Anna are celebrating the incarnation. Aptly, the reading from Hebrews 2 was also about the mystery of the incarnation, for example where it says Jesus took on “flesh and blood” and “became like us”. Although he existed as God before time began, amazingly he takes on real humanity and becomes really and truly like us.

But these readings also show we are on the move towards Easter. For example, Hebrews 2.14 points out that Christ took on our human nature, *so that* “through death” he might “expiate... the sins of the people” and free us from “the fear of death” by destroying “the power of death”. “Expiation” is simply “the act of making amends” or reparation for guilt or wrongdoing, and so Christians have always understood Christ’s death on Good Friday to be the atoning sacrifice the author has in mind here, in Christ making amends for our sins.

Our reading from Hebrews, then, reminds us of this crux of the good news we are to tell – that Jesus took on human flesh “*so that* through death” he might “make atonement for the sins of the people”. As such, Simeon can say, “now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, *for my eyes have seen your salvation*”.

Simeon is unafraid to die, in fact he is ready to depart “in peace”, because he knows he has seen the coming of Christ, who brings salvation.

So, friends, this Candlemas, let’s all seek to be perceptive like Simeon and Anna, so we *see* Christ where he is at work in and around us. Let’s stay close enough to him, through prayer, online worship, and our own devotional study, that we don’t mistake for a duck what is a rabbit, or vice versa, so we know God well enough to discern him the way Simeon and Anna do. And let’s be active like Simeon and Anna in telling others about Christ’s coming, about what he has done, and what he is doing today.