

## Sermon for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple aka Candlemas 30 Jan 2011 Nicosia

It seems our present times are filled with so-called celebrities and somehow people think that if they are beautiful or can act or can sing, they are role models. But is that really true? The singer Mariah Carey said: "Whenever I watch TV and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can't help but cry. I mean I'd love to be skinny like that, but not with all those flies and death and stuff." Some bright people can say dumb things.

When the American baseball player signed a phenomenal contract to play baseball in Japan, he was asked what daily life was like in Japan. He replied that the language was the most difficult and different feature. "It's crazy," he said. "The only American words I saw were Sony and Mitsubishi."

There is no limit to the foolish things people do and say, particularly our legislators, people whom we expect to be clever and wise.

A few years back a man named Robert W. Pelton did some research on laws that have been passed with regard to behaviour in churches. Some of them are quite interesting.

For example, young girls are never allowed to walk a tightrope in a town called Wheeler, unless it's in a church. I'm sure there's a good reason why this law was put on the books. I simply can't imagine what it could be.

In Blackwater, tickling a woman under her chin with a feather duster while she's in church service carries a penalty of \$10.00 and one day in jail.

In Honey Creek, no one is permitted to carry a slingshot to church except police. No citizen in Leecreek is allowed to attend church in any red-coloured garment.

Swinging a yo-yo in church or anywhere in public on the Sabbath is prohibited in a place called Studley.

And, finally, turtle races are not permitted within 100 yards of a local church at any time in the town of Slaughter.

Well maybe our lawmakers like our celebrities don't always live up to our expectations.

Actor David Niven once told a wonderful story about actress Loretta Young. Some of you will remember Loretta best from her television show, at least those of you who remember black-and-white television.

When she was young, Loretta Young was quite pretty. It was her looks, says Niven, not her talent that got her cast in film after film.

Cecil B. DeMille was once directing Loretta Young in a movie titled, "The Crusades." She was doing a scene urging Richard the Lion-Hearted to fight on behalf of the Christian nations in the crusades. Loretta read the line: "Richard, you gotta save Christianity!" She wasn't very convincing. So DeMille took Loretta aside and asked her to put some AWE into her line. They reshot the scene, and Loretta Young said: "Aw, Richard, you gotta save Christianity!"

OK, so the bubble is burst, none of these live up to our expectations. But what did Simeon expect all those days sitting around in the temple? Ponder that for a minute.

Meanwhile, if you ask most Christians why Christ came into the world, what do you think they will say? Likely something such as he came to die for our sins. And that's true, of course, but there is another reason Christ came into the world: it was to train an ordinary group of people to take his message to the world. Who was that group of people? Why us, the church. The key reason Christ came into the world was to found the church. We are to be his body doing his saving work in a world that is lost.

God chose the church to do His work in the world. This is the primary reason Christ came into the world.

The 22nd verse of the second chapter of Luke reads like this: "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord . . ."

This was the custom in New Testament times. Couples brought their first born and presented them at the temple [just as parents in our church bring their children and present them to God. Fortunately we do not restrict this important occasion to our first born. This is an important time for parents with every child.]

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus as an infant to God and they lived godly lives when they returned home. Note how Luke sums up Jesus' childhood years, "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him."

I wish every child could be surrounded by the kind of love and understanding Jesus received from his parents. Let me tell you another story from Rabbi Marc Gafni. Gafni recalls one of the first bar mitzvahs he ever performed. It was for a boy named Louis. Louis was awkward and sad. His insensitive parents did little to encourage his self-esteem. They implied that he was too dumb to learn the traditional Hebrew passages a boy recites for his bar mitzvah.

Rabbi Gafni was determined to bring out the best in Louis. He spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers. He discovered that Louis was smart, and had a fantastic singing voice. On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. At the end

of the ceremony, Rabbi Gafni stood and spoke directly to Louis. He said, "Louis, this morning you met your real self. This is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. Whatever people told you yesterday, and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow, promise me one thing. Remember . . . this is you. Remember, and don't ever lose it."

A few years later, Louis wrote to Rabbi Gafni. The boy whose parents predicted that he was too dumb to perform a traditional bar mitzvah was studying for his medical degree. He was also engaged to be married. Louis ended his letter by saying, ". . . I kept my promise—I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning when you said that this is who I am. For this, I thank you."

I want you to think of Rabbi Gafni as Simeon. Saying "Jesus, this is who you really are."

Luke divides the story of the birth of Jesus into several acts, each act has dialogue, and a song, much the way an opera has arias. One scene even has angels singing.

We are familiar with most of these scenes. The Annunciation to Mary: the angel comes to Mary, tells her she is going to have a baby. Mary sings, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

Then Mary visits Elizabeth, and sings the great aria, the *Magnificat*, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour, for he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me and holy is his name." Then the shepherds are visited by the angels. The angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest." Then the Nativity, the birth itself, and all is quiet. Not a word is spoken. Mary ponders all of this in her heart.

Then, finally, comes the last scene, our text for this morning, the concluding scene in Luke's drama, the visit to the Temple. The final song is sung by Simeon. It is called the *Nunc Dimittis*, after the Latin text in the Vulgate, "Now let thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel."

It is an appropriate conclusion to the story of the birth of Jesus. The holy family comes to the Temple for a Jewish ritual, providing the evidence that Mary and Joseph were a devout religious family, and they intend to raise their son in the faith.

They go into the Temple. Simeon is there. He is an old man, looking for the Messiah. He is at the Temple because one of the prophecies, this one in Malachi, says that when the Messiah comes, he will "suddenly come to his Temple." So if you want to see the Messiah, then your best bet is to hang around the Temple, because that is probably where the Messiah is going to show up.

Old Simeon has been there for years. Every morning now for years, he has gotten up, had his bagel and coffee, and gone to work at the Temple. He has the right credentials, according to Luke. Luke says that he is both "righteous and devout." You can't get any better in the Jewish faith than being righteous and devout. He is also faithful in his vocation as a "Messiah-watcher." He never misses. He is there every day. He is righteous. He is devout. He is faithful. He has the credentials to spot the Messiah when he shows up.

Here's what happens. Simeon's hanging out at the Temple. Mary, Joseph, the baby, come to the Temple. Only Simeon's not looking for a baby. Simeon is looking for some handsome warrior on a horse, or for someone coming on a cloud. This is not what he expected. But he is strangely drawn to this baby. Mary holds him. He goes over to Mary, and says, "Let me see the baby."

Can you imagine Mary's anxiety? This strange old man asking to see her baby. Simeon holds the baby, looks into his face, and smiles. The baby looks back at this craggy, old wrinkled face, frowns at first, then smiles. I think that is when Simeon sings, "Lord, let now thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Simeon, the expert witness, declares that this is it. This is the one we have been waiting for. He is here. The Messiah has come, "So let now thy servant depart in peace." But Simeon isn't finished. Not only is there the canticle, there is also an oracle. The oracle is the prophecy, "This child is set for the rise and fall of many." Then he turns to Mary with these terrible words, "And a sword shall pierce your soul also."

That is our text. What are we to make of it? Simeon is obviously there as corroboration. He is the expert witness to provide the essential testimony that this is the Messiah. He is a good witness. He is a righteous and devout Jew, who spent all of his life looking for the Messiah. Witnesses don't come any better than that. So if you are Jewish, and you need convincing by evidence of a righteous and devout Jew that this is the Messiah, then that is what Simeon is there for.

But for the rest of us, Simeon has another reason for being there, because Simeon announces that there has been a change in plan. Instead of the Messiah coming suddenly, ushering in a whole new age where all of a sudden everything is perfect, things are going to be pretty much the same as they have always been. At least it will look that way

Jesus did not come then, where men and women expected him to come. He may not come today, where we expect him to come. We have a tendency to look for God to come among us in the bright spots of the world, in the creeds and in the cathedrals. But he was found in the shadows, by the pool of Bethesda with the crippled and the diseased.

A man jumped into a cab in London and told the cabbie to take him to God. Without hesitation the cabbie drove him to St. Paul's Cathedral. As the man got out of the cab he

asked the driver, "Are you sure that God is here?" "If he is not here, he is not in town," the driver answered. I wonder if it ever entered the mind of the driver to take the man to the slums of that great city.

Remember you and I, we, have a role in all this. God chose the church to do His work in the world. This is the primary reason Christ came into the world.

The need for evangelism is greater now than ever before in our history. As long-time members retire to other communities, it is important that new people take their place. But these new families need to be invited! That is a task which belongs to every member of every congregation throughout the world. We can advertise about our congregation until the cows come home. But in the final analysis, it is through the personal witness of individual Christians that the church of Jesus Christ grows and fulfils its mission. It will take your active witness to make it happen. And by witness, I do not mean just words, but rather by the joy you radiate, by the life you live, that's how you witness to your faith and you shine onto others.

Permit me to tell you a favourite story to illustrate what I am describing. Sandy MacTavish was one of the town drunks in a small village in Scotland. The local preacher had tried for years without success to get Sandy to go "on the wagon." In a last ditch effort, the parson called a meeting at the church of everyone in town who had trouble with alcohol. He was delighted when he saw Sandy MacTavish show up and sit in the back pew. He was so inspired that he delivered the most eloquent sermon of his entire career, telling about the evils of drink and the harmful effects it had on both body and soul.

At the end of the sermon, he announced that he was sending around a piece of paper that he wanted people to sign pledging that they would give up drinking. As he watched the list circulate, everyone signed it, including Sandy MacTavish. After the service, he was so excited that he snatched up the list without looking at it and ran home to tell his wife about his victory. He unrolled the list before her eyes and sure enough, written across the bottom were the words, "witnessed by Sandy MacTavish."

I would repeat my challenge to you: It is through the personal witness of individuals that the church grows and fulfils its mission. It will take your active and enthusiastic witness to make it happen. This morning I hope that you will let Simeon and Anna shape your response to the good news of God's love shown to us in Bethlehem and recognised in the temple in Jerusalem.