

Doing your best

Luke 2.22-40

Most parents want to do their best for their children – so they go to extraordinary lengths sometimes to ensure that little Jimmy or Janie gets the right education. We have all seen advertisements for houses saying that they are in the catchment area of a particular school which has a good reputation. Moving house is quite a major undertaking to get the school you want. When I was a curate, we had such a popular church secondary school in the parish, and we had the annual procession of people coming to church with their ten year olds in the hope that they would have put in enough appearances for the Vicar to recommend them for one of the coveted places. I think for some of those families, coming to church was an even bigger sacrifice than moving house! Education is not the only issue, of course, and decisions about immunisation and diet and all the rest are things which pre-occupy all new parents.

In the Gospel today we hear the story of two parents doing their best for their infant son. Luke, bless him, gets the story a bit mixed up, because, Gentile that he is, he doesn't quite understand these infancy rituals, and mixes up two different rituals – the redemption of the first born, and the purification of the mother. But it doesn't really matter from our perspective. He is telling us that Mary and Joseph did the right things by their infant son – the things that would ensure that he had a good start in life in terms of their religious belief and practice. So at the beginning of last month we remembered Jesus' circumcision, and now we have the story of his redemption. This is the end of the little section at the beginning of Luke's Gospel which he writes as a kind of preface to the rest. After this story we move on thirty years or thereabouts, to the preaching of John the Baptist. But in these infancy stories, he has set the scene for what is to follow.

Let me just point out how Luke sets this whole section in the Temple at Jerusalem. The very opening of the Gospel is a story of an event in the Temple, when the archangel Gabriel appears to Zechariah, John the Baptist's elderly father, and tells him he is to have a son, who will turn many people to the Lord. Then we go off to Bethlehem and so on, but this scene-setting part returns to the Temple for this final scene, and an encounter with another elderly man called Simeon, who like Gabriel, has a message for the parents about their child. It is quite deliberate scene setting. Legally it was not necessary for these two conflated rituals of redemption and purification to take place at the Temple. And if Mary and Joseph were still in Bethlehem forty days after the birth of Jesus (which is when the purification rite had to take place) it was a tidy step to walk to Jerusalem rather than performing the ritual in Bethlehem. If they had returned to Nazareth, it is even stranger that they should travel so far. But Luke is not a historian in our modern sense. He is anxious that we get the right ideas in our mind, not the accurate historical facts. What he wants us to know is that Jesus belonged in the Temple. That was his Father's house, and he was

later to fulfil all that the Temple stood for in his own person, by being the sacrifice that would make all the sacrifices in the Temple things of the past, and by referring to his own body as the Temple. When St John tells the story of Jesus throwing the money-changers out of the Temple – which he significantly places right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and not at the end, like the other evangelists – then Jesus is asked to explain himself. ‘Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days’. They think he is talking about the stone building around them, but John says ‘But he was speaking of the temple of his body’

The ironic thing about all these things, is that they were totally unnecessary. For Jesus to be given to God was by the way, because he was God. It is all topsy-turvy. In the ritual of redemption, the parents symbolically buy the child back from God by giving an offering. But that imagery of buying was to be stood on its head because Christians came to talk in terms not of Jesus being bought back, but Jesus being the price, the offering which buys *us* back, so we can belong to God. In another story which we have remembered during this Epiphany season, which comes to an end today, we heard of the baptism of Jesus. Again it is a story about something unnecessary – the baptism of John was about repentance for sin, but Jesus hadn’t sinned. But all of them are part of this important scene setting which says that in God becoming man in Jesus, he is absolutely and totally identifying with us. He was not disguised as human, but really was human, and so he went through all the rites and rituals that applied to every human in the Jewish world.

Let’s return from these events of 2000 years ago to today, and to the parents of today that I started with. There was a time, not all that long ago, when the majority of parents in this country did the equivalent of the stories we have heard about Jesus, in bringing their child to be baptised. In the 1930s it was about 70% in Anglican churches alone. That has long since changed. The figures for 2023, which are the latest we can accurately have is that there were 591,072 births in England. Of those only 49,000 were baptised in infancy, although a further 28,000 were baptised in childhood after a year old. So it is roughly one child in seven who is baptised these days – maybe 13% of the total. That’s quite a change from 1930s 70%. Now you can argue that we should welcome that – after all less than 10% of the population regularly go to church, so it is higher than that in percentage terms. But set that against the 2021 census returns in which 46% of the population labelled themselves Christian (and other religions account for 10.6% and 37% reported as having no religious belief. It is fairly clear that the popularity of church schools, indeed of faith schools, is not just that they often have better results, but that parents with little or no outward allegiance nonetheless want faith-based places for their children to be educated.

So I believe we should be very, very welcoming to parents who want baptism for their children, including those whose grasp of what they are doing is sketchy. Clergy will try to ensure that it becomes at least a little less sketchy than before, and the place of the whole congregation in affirming God’s love and acceptance of the child, and its family is vital. They are bringing their child to the Temple, and making the connection between the child and his or her God.

I said that Jesus' redemption in this story we recall today was topsy-turvy. There is an element of that in what happens today. I have on my shelf a fascinating book by Robert Coles, who is professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard, and a former Pulitzer Prizewinner. It is called 'The Spiritual Life of Children', and in it he recounts some of this very profound researches with children of all the major faiths. They talk to him very openly, because he does not represent the authority figures in their religion. There is huge honesty. What it reveals is the depth of spirituality which children have, not because they are taught well in their Sunday School or Madrassah or Synagogue school, but because they are made in the image of God, and have a natural religion which may well challenge and eventually differ from the religion of their parents. He writes at one point about one young girl: 'Let others visit God on Sunday for an hour, or have their moments of engagement with him, spiritual in content, psychologically significant: for her God is just what she once characterised him as being, 'a companion who won't leave.' Jesus told us that unless we become as little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Theologians have spiritualised that into saying we need to be totally submissive, or totally trusting, or totally dependent. They may or may not have good points to make. But what Coles' book suggests is that we can take those words as they stand – and look to find a depth of spirituality in children which would put most of us to shame.

If parents truly want the very best for their children, then they presumably want the best spiritually as well. Bringing them to the Temple may be the start of enabling that, and how good we are at welcoming them may well affect where things move on from that starting point. That in my last parish there were some people who didn't come to church when we had baptisms depressed me hugely. They had not yet grasped what Jesus said, nor have they grasped the responsibility we all have towards parents who are seeking a spiritual dimension to their child's life, nor had they realised what they might learn from these young people of God. Simeon and Anna today bless God that Mary and Joseph have brought their child to the Temple. We need to bless those parents who bring their children to receive the grace of God's love, however vaguely they may understand it. From small seeds large trees grow. Maybe we have a Simeon and Anna role to play.