

Sunday, February 02, 2025

The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ
(Candlemas)

Procession, Solemn Eucharist, and Blessing of the

Candles

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 2:22-40

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The Way God Visits Us

Even if 25 years have passed already since the year 2000, I still keep a vivid memory of the exhibition *Seeing Salvation* at the National Gallery in London dedicated to portrayals of Jesus in paintings throughout history. It was a great success: it registered the highest number of visitors ever recorded for an exhibition in the UK. I remember being totally fascinated especially by the angle chosen by its curators: *Seeing Salvation*.

Some of the painters had been believers and might indeed have tried to represent not just scenes from Jesus' life but the supernatural meaning of his identity and of his actions. Many other painters though only had a nominal faith and used scenes from the Gospels to express perfectly secular conceptions of the world, of humanity, and of society. Yet the premise of the exhibition seemed to be that whenever you deal with Jesus and his actions you cannot avoid sensing the presence and work of something greater and deeper, you cannot help being taken out of your usual way of approaching people, life, death, and suffering – you are enabled to see yourself and other people differently – in other words, you *see salvation*.

In today's Gospel, the elderly Simeon is intent on a similar exercise: he meets a young couple with a child in the Temple and proclaims: "Now I can depart in peace because my eyes have *seen salvation*" (Lk 2.29).

Simeon had trained the whole of his life for this: seeing salvation wherever it can be found. He did not hone this skill at an exhibition in London but had the vast reservoir of poems, myths, symbols, stories represented by Scripture – that is works of art that challenge those who meditate on them to see a deeper plot at work in life and history – the plot we call *salvation*.

He surely knew the page from Malachi which says that God would storm in the Temple "suddenly" and in such a way that nobody could "endure the day of his coming" because he would be "like the refiner's fire" – something impressive, dramatic, disruptive and frightening.

And yet he did not take this passage literally. Otherwise he could not have recognized the entrance of God in the temple described in the Gospel.

Simeon saw what looked like an ordinary couple that had come to the temple to perform a rite which was routine in the Jewish society of the time. That same day there must have been dozens of other couples doing exactly the same thing. Simeon held in his arms what seemed a child like any other whose life was going to remain completely unremarkable and indistinguishable from the life of any other human person for the following three decades or so.

And yet something did mark this family out. Like Simeon himself, and Anna, the other character of today's Gospel, Jesus and his parents belonged to the biblical category of the *anawim* which means "those who are bowed down": the vulnerable, the marginalized, the socio-economically oppressed, those displaced by arbitrary political power, disempowered by illness, old age, and widowhood.

The ritual purification required by the Law of Moses after childbirth (Leviticus 12:6-8) required the mother to offer in sacrifice a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering. If the mother was poor, though, she could instead offer just two birds. Mary and Joseph's offering of two birds (instead of a lamb) means that Jesus was born into a poor family. We know how Jesus's family lacked wealth and social status to the point that they could not secure proper lodging at the time of his birth: he was delivered in a barn because there was no room in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7). Although Luke does not include the flight to Egypt (which is found in Matthew), his Gospel depicts Jesus' family as displaced: Mary and Joseph, originally from Nazareth, are forced by the Roman census ordered by the Emperor Augustus to embark in an arduous journey to Bethlehem at the worst of time owing to Mary's final stages of pregnancy (Luke 2:1-5). They are entirely at the mercy of the imperial rule and lack control over their own lives.

Being himself an *anawim*, someone entirely dependent on God for his own life, Simeon recognized *salvation* in this family's poverty and in this child's utter powerlessness. God brought salvation by letting himself to be held in Simeon's arms.

This is the kind of salvation proclaimed by Jesus "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*" (Luke 4:18) and "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20).

Like Simeon, Christians are given eyes to recognize God in those who not only are marginalized, displaced and bowed down by social and political circumstances but then are scapegoated as the culprits of all the problems we face in our world today: if they are poor is because they are lazy, they are a danger to our children, a threat to our economy if not to our national identity. There is one sentence I chanced upon online a couple of weeks ago that has kept resonating with me ever since: "People who make \$700 per hour have convinced people who make \$25 per hour that people who make \$7 per hour (or, we might add, nothing at all) are the source of all our problems".

Excessive and unaffordable public social spending might be a legitimate concern. Uncontrolled migration might indeed be unsustainable. There is no easy way of tackling the issue of redistribution of wealth in a world in which the gap between obscene wealth and utter poverty is spiraling out of control. It is legitimate to have opposite political views on these matters which should be decided by democratic processes.

The Gospel however reminds us of a fundamental truth: the poor are not the problem but the solution. Or rather, the solution is the way we treat those who are "bowed down", what we do to alleviate their plight. Whatever our political or economic allegiance, whether we think that the State should assist the

poor or embrace trickle-down economics, one thing will never change – and Jesus assures us of this: “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew 26:11).

And it is in those who are “bowed down” that the Gospel wants us to *see salvation*.

You know about *Neighbor to Neighbor*, our Saint Thomas program to engage with our community in Mid-Town Manhattan in cooperation with Fifth Presbyterian. In the back of your leaflets you can find a link with more details about the program and ways to volunteer for it. It is modest initiative: we give breakfast to neighbors in need every Saturday morning from 9 to 10 am. If you talk to the many people from our community who have volunteered for it over the past few months **though** you will hear how quietly powerful this simple act of care can be.

Just like Simeon, our volunteers attend this temple, this church assiduously. In a way similar to what was offered in the London exhibition I mentioned earlier, what they find here is beauty and meaning. Here they are exposed to the vast reservoir of poems, myths, symbols, stories represented by Scripture – that is divinely inspired works of art that train their eyes to *see salvation* wherever it can be found. But if you ask them *where* is it that they actually *see salvation*, they might tell you that just as with Simeon, it is in the utter powerlessness of the neighbors in need that visit us on Saturdays in the cloisters.

“The poor you will always have with you”.

Individually we might be able to do very little – but as a community of faith, together, and with our neighbouring churches, we can help our society to stop treating those who are “bowed down” as a problem and recognize in them our God visiting us, our God allowing us to hold him in our arms.

Mind you, this might be the secret to the joy and fulfilment we so eagerly seek in our lives – it was the case for the elderly Simeon who declared: “Now O Lord your servant can depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for us”, a light that keeps hope, humanity, decency, care and maybe even love *alive* in our city, in our nation, and in our world.
