

Evening Worship – Sunday 1 February 2009
Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Sermon given by Lynda Taylor

[Readings: Haggai 2:1-9, John 2:18-22]

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable unto you, O Lord our God and our Redeemer. Amen.

In the Church's calendar today we remember and celebrate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Our readings this morning recounted that beautiful and moving occasion, described by Luke: Mary and Joseph take their baby son Jesus, just 6 weeks old, up to the great Temple in Jerusalem. They do this to give thanks to God and to observe the religious customs of their day. On their visit to the Temple, the little family encounter 2 elderly worshippers - Simeon and Anna. Over many years Simeon and Anna have been faithful in prayer and in attendance at the Temple. Thanks to their constant attentiveness to God day by day, they immediately recognise the spiritual significance of this baby, and they join with Mary and Joseph to marvel at this gift of God. Their words of thanks and praise, some of which we sang in the Nunc Dimittis, point backwards into the past – to the promises declared by God through the prophets down the ages about a Messiah King who would one day come to save his people. But Simeon and Anna's words also point forwards in time to the impact this child will have in the future, to the suffering he (and Mary) will face, to the division he will cause between those who believe and trust in him, and those who reject him and who, in doing so, reject God himself.

Our Bible passages this evening reflect this element of looking backwards and looking forwards. Our OT reading takes us back many centuries, long before Jesus' birth to the words of the minor prophet, Haggai. Our NT reading, from John's gospel, fast-forwards 30 years from Jesus' birth to a time when the adult Jesus returns to the Temple in Jerusalem at the start of his ministry, a time when he causes his listeners

great puzzlement as he speaks of destroying and raising the temple in 3 days. Whether they look backwards or forwards, both our readings this evening focus attention on that great biblical image of the Temple with all its rich symbolism – past, present and future.

For Haggai and the people of Israel, the Temple of the OT represented the house of God, the place where God dwelt, the place where his presence could be seen and felt on earth. The presence of God, concentrated in his earthly dwelling-place, had always been important to the people of Israel. As they journeyed through the wilderness following the exodus from slavery in Egypt, the wandering Israelite nation lived in tents. God's dwelling-place then was also a form of portable tented shrine – the Tabernacle. As the centuries passed, and the people of Israel settled to a more stable existence in the Promised Land, they built themselves permanent homes of wood and stone. And in the heart of the growing city of Jerusalem, a new, more permanent dwelling place for the Lord was also constructed – a Temple built with stone and cedarwood from Lebanon. This first Temple was built in the 10th C BC under King Solomon, son of King David, but it was destroyed by Nebuchednezzar 400 years later when God's people were taken into exile. Two generations later, the Jews were repatriated and under the leadership of Zerubbabel they set about rebuilding a second, rather simpler and less splendid Temple in Jerusalem, finally completed in 516 BC. It is this building to which our passage in Haggai refers. Though this second temple has none of the glory of Solomon's original design, Haggai tells the people not to worry for God's spirit abides among them nonetheless, and Haggai even prophesies that 'the latter splendour (or glory) of this house shall be greater than the former' (v9) – a promise we shall see fulfilled in Jesus' lifetime.

Five more centuries pass and we find ourselves in the reign of King Herod the Great, shortly before the birth of Jesus. Herod re-established the rebuilding of the

great Temple at Jerusalem as part of his strategy for pacifying the Jewish authorities during the Roman occupation, a building programme that was to last more than 80 years until AD 64, though it was to be destroyed soon after by the Romans in AD70. This is the Temple where Simeon and Anna spent time in prayer and worship each day – experiencing the joy of God’s presence. This is the place where Joseph and Mary brought their 6-week-old baby son to give thanks to God and to receive a blessing. Twelve years later, when they feared they had lost him, this was the place where they found their son, deep in discussion with the religious teachers of the day.

The Temple had always been, in a special sense, the place of God’s presence - the closest human beings could come to God himself. For Jesus too, the Temple was ‘his Father’s House’ – the place where his father dwelt and could be encountered by his children (Lk 2:49). And yet, with the coming of Jesus, something changed. Encountering the presence of God was no longer constrained to the physical dwelling place constructed for him by human hands, however beautifully it was crafted out of stone and timber, silver and gold. Instead, God chose to dwell with his people in a new, even more physical way, in human flesh and blood, in time and space, in human activities and relationships, through the person of Jesus Christ. And as Simeon foresaw, God’s purpose was to reveal himself through Jesus not just to the Jews but to Gentiles also. The barriers that prevented God’s children from seeking his face were being dismantled. It’s perhaps worth noting that John’s gospel places our NT reading directly after Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem. In this episode Jesus drives out from the Temple precincts the moneychangers and traders - all those whose financial transactions in currency exchange or commercial trade in sacrificial livestock are making it difficult, even impossible, for Jews and even Gentiles, to come close to God. In his words and actions, Jesus challenges the barriers that the religious authorities have systematically established between God and human beings, those

rules and practices that make access to God harder rather than easier. When the Jews demand from Jesus a miraculous sign of his authority to pose any such a challenge, Jesus replies cryptically ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.’ He IS that miraculous sign. ‘Look at me’ he seems to say, ‘understand who I really am. Then you will understand why I have authority to do and say what I do.’ Jesus could accurately describe himself as the Temple of God. The gospel of John summarises it perfectly: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.’ (Jn 1:14).

As well as encouraging the rebuilding of God’s temple in his own day, Haggai pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, to a time when the latter glory of God’s house would surpass the former. In Jesus’ incarnation this was undoubtedly what happened. In the physical person of Jesus, through his birth, life and ministry, both Jews and Gentiles experienced God’s presence in a radically new, accessible and dynamic way. And through Jesus’ death and resurrection – through the destruction and the rebuilding of this new dwelling place that God had created for himself - there would be countless numbers of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, who would come to know God’s mercy, forgiveness, love, and grace in their lives.

So where does this leave us – here and now, in our time and space? I’ve always believed that Christ’s followers were called to be a visible sign of his body here on earth, continuing the work he began in his earthly ministry, acting as a sort of dwelling place or home for God’s love and mercy. Christ’s body is no longer confined to physical time and space, but is instead embodied within ‘a spiritual house’ made up of ‘living stones’ – to use the language of the apostle Peter (Pet 2:5). Perhaps the Christian church is called to reflect all that was best in the Temple – a place where God’s presence can be encountered, where wanderers are welcomed, where the

hurting find wholeness, where sinners receive forgiveness, and the lost can find the way home. A place of good news.

So is that what we are here at St Andrew's, Chesterton? Is that what we aspire and strive to be, not just through our physical buildings and the way we use them, but through our relationships with one another and with the wider communities of which we are each a part? Individually and collectively, how faithful are we in fulfilling the call to be the temple or dwelling place where others can encounter God's presence, or to be the body where others can clearly see the face of Christ?

Last autumn, as a PCC we spent time reflecting on our life as a church community, our strengths and weaknesses, and we sought to understand better what God might be calling us to focus on in the coming months and years. The Mission Action Planning Process – which is explained in this simple leaflet – is a sort of mapping exercise, a way of helping us to discern and communicate with one another the nature of the journey God is calling us as a church to make under his leading and in his strength. I would encourage you to read and reflect on it and to see yourself there at the heart of it - a 'living stone', part of a spiritual temple that recognises Christ as its fundamental cornerstone, from which the whole building takes its design and orientation.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and Jesus' later visits to the Temple in childhood and adulthood, draw our attention to how God initiated a radically new way of relating to Him that no longer depended on buildings and sacrifices. As we move towards Lent in a few weeks' time, we may welcome the opportunity to deepen our relationship with God by accompanying Jesus into the desert. For the greatest journey God calls us to make in our lives is the journey to seek his face, to dwell in his presence, and to drink deep of the life-giving water that only He can give.