

Two sermons for Candlemas, 28th January 2024

Readings [Hebrews 2:14-18](#); [Luke 2.22-40](#)

Holy Communion at 8.30am

Zero sum game

Like St Paul, when I was a child, I reasoned like a child ([1 Corinthians 13.11](#)). One day, when I was about nine, I saw what seemed like the perfect birthday present for my mother. I knew that she had one bet a year, on the Grand National, and here was a set of six glasses (shot glasses we would call them now) each with the portrait of a Grand-National-winning horse. Ideal!

What a bad choice this was: a gift that hinted at a fondness for booze as well as betting (neither was remotely true in my mum's case) and just not very feminine. But she was very nice about it. By my mid-teens I was doing better – so I thought. For her birthday one year I bought perfume. Again Mum received it graciously. Then, early one Saturday evening, some months later, I was going to the birthday party of a girl from the excellent youth club run by the Methodist church where we both went. I hadn't been able to find a present and the shops were about to shut. What could I do? 'Look on top of the wardrobe,' said Mum. There, in a suitcase, she kept things we didn't need but which might just do for someone else. I looked; and there was the perfume I'd given her months before. I was hurt.

Looking back, I don't blame her at all – teenage boys are generally not great judges of fragrance for middle-aged women – but at the time I was upset: if someone gives you a present, you should hang on to it, not give it away again.

So I reasoned then, as a (slightly older) child. But when I became an adult, then (like St Paul) I put an end to childish ways – or some of them.

The opening pages of Luke's gospel are a time of gifts. Today Mary and Joseph bring Jesus their baby to the Temple in Jerusalem. They are following the law which Moses gave their ancestors: your eldest son should be dedicated to the Lord. In other words, they offer Jesus as a gift *to God*. But this comes straight after the Christmas stories, in which Luke has gone to some lengths to tell us that Jesus is *God's* gift to Mary and Joseph, and to the whole world. That's why our crib is still here, for one last day.

Remember the words of the angel to the shepherds, 'To *you* is born in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord' ([Luke 2.11](#)). So Mary and Joseph are - almost nonsensically, it seems - giving to God what God has just given to them.

This nonsense is part of what Paul calls the foolishness of God ([1 Corinthians 1:25](#)), a foolishness that is wiser than human wisdom. Worldly wisdom thinks in terms of ownership. It speaks the language of possession, so that what is mine cannot by definition be yours. God, foolishly, speaks the language of gift, of things to be given and not hung on to but given again, to be received, enjoyed and shared (a bit like the suitcase).

Jesus is the foolish gift of God to a world too scared to be generous. The old man Simeon prophesies that he will become: 'a sign that will be opposed.' How true that is, for when Jesus becomes an adult he develops a ministry that is so bound up with finding what's lost and mending what's broken that he will have no time for possession. And people won't like that, especially those who have a few possessions of their own.

They don't like it, and neither do we. Jesus is a sign that we oppose, too, in what is a very territorial world. Think of Russia's violent land grab in Ukraine, the bloody land shared and disputed by Israel and Palestine; and, here, how most of us see the need for more houses and wind farms – just not over the road.

I used to live in a Cathedral close, the original gated community. Despite years of living in addresses on the open street, I began to develop instincts of possessiveness about our little plot, as though everything – even empty space – must belong to somebody and therefore not to anybody else.

And you can do this with God.

The hours in my day, the money in my pocket, the talent in my mind and hands, it's mine.

Unless I decide to give some of it to you, God, then it will be yours.

Is that it? A zero sum game in which one gains so the other must be worse off? No, it all belongs to God, but God is generous and shares it with us, so we offer it back to God, share it with God and with one another.

God gives us everything, on trust, even children. If you are a parent, they are your children, but even more they belong to God. Just like Joseph and Mary: Jesus is their boy, but even more Jesus is the Son of God.

And as he grows up, Jesus will live every moment with this thought in his head: this is God's moment, God's gift to me, on trust; a moment to be lived, and enjoyed and shared.

The world is full of people who try to hang on to everything they have. If you become one of them, life becomes a battle. Everything is a threat to you and your things, you end up with a burglar alarm on your heart, and the world becomes a dark place.

Jesus and his way offer us escape from that darkness.

That's why this Candlemas Day we call him the light of the nations, and of our hearts.

Choral Eucharist at 11.00am

What we turn into

Some years ago there was an advert for British Airways. It showed children in a classroom doing what children do, and the advert suggested, with a caption above each child, what they would turn into when they grew up. One child was calm and helpful, trying to reconcile two kids who were winding each other up. Over her head it said, 'cabin crew'.

If you're one of our younger worshippers, that's why your grownup family probably find you fascinating – and also slightly frightening. Fascinating, because of what you might become: all that potential, who knows how it will unfold? Frightening, because for the grownup (the parent, the teacher, the pastor) there's the thought, what if I get things wrong?

Happily, most children are pretty resilient, and can be quite forgiving of even useless grownups who tried their best.

But some lives turn into tragedy. Yesterday we commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day, so think of some of the monsters of our age – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Milosevich, Putin – and others we could add, like the inciters and perpetrators of the genocide in Rwanda, thirty years ago this year. Imagine each of *them* as a child. Was the wickedness there in them then, more than in all the other babies born that day? If not, what went wrong? What (or who) helped them turn into what they became?

Candlemas gives us the story of Mary and Joseph taking the baby Jesus to the Temple, and brings to an end forty days from Christmas Day. That's why our crib, for a few hours more, is still in the Holy Family Chapel.

Forty days to celebrate God's gift to us in Jesus, the candle of the world, forty days to celebrate because in Jesus God has done something unimaginable, has crossed the frontier and come among us godless, hopeless men and women, taking on your flesh and mine, becoming 'like his brothers and sisters in every respect', as the letter to the Hebrews puts it.

The story is all about promise and potential – and foreboding. When you think about the baby Jesus you will slide into schmaltz and sentimentality unless you think about what this child will become: the cross of Jesus overshadows the cradle of Jesus.

And think of the people who will make the killing of Jesus happen – Judas, King Herod, Pontius Pilate – and those who will let it happen – Peter and the other disciples: they too were each a child once, someone's little boy.

Simeon, the old man in the Temple, catches all this. He seems to know what Jesus will turn into. The destiny of this child, he says, is to bring about 'the falling and the rising of many'.

It seems that Jesus' destiny will be to leave people no hiding place. He will meet them and call them and they will have to choose, and either they will rise to the moment or they will fall.

In a sense, they will become either better or worse because of Jesus, and some of them will make him pay for backing them into such a corner.

Back in the Temple, Simeon and Anna each say their piece, and the parents take their baby and go home. And then nothing happens.

Luke's gospel is all but silent about Jesus as he grows up (we get one glimpse of him twelve years later, [Luke 2.41-52](#)) but that doesn't seem to matter. As far as God is concerned there is time, time for everything; because, says Luke, about thirty years after today's scene in the Temple, Jesus' moment comes, and he starts to say the things and do the things that will make the old man's words come true.

Time, and the passing of time. That what makes our memories work, and not always for the better. St Paul in one of his letters talks about 'putting away' childish things ([1 Corinthians 13.11](#)), but some childish things are hard to shake off. Some long distant humiliation, a moment when someone made you feel stupid or small when you were just a kid. It was long ago, but perhaps it has not gone away; it bides its time, feeding your fear and resentment until its moment comes and it makes you belittle someone else; or worse.

But the good news is that that is how God works too.

Perhaps there is some distant word in your memory. It may have come through a parent, or a friend, a word of encouragement - You know, you have a real gift for, say, listening to people, or making them laugh.

Or it may have been when you saw something bad and told yourself (or was it God telling you?) 'You can't go through life just letting things like this happen'.

Years passed, however, and life was busy; perhaps the time was never quite right. Anyhow, nothing happened. But the call of God did not go away, and it is there still, biding its time, waiting for its moment.

Jesus will know his moment, for his whole existence is one of trust and openness to God. For the rest of us it comes harder, yet knowing your moment, knowing when to say Yes to God, when to choose to turn into what God created you or me to be, that is the thing that matters most in life, more than any other choice we make.

You may have heard words over these last days from those touched by the horrible things that Holocaust Memorial Day calls us to remember. These words are by the Scottish poet Alan Bold. He wrote them in 1967, inspired (if that is the right word) by the gate of the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

From that gate

We turn away. We always do.

It's what we turn into that matters.

We are not helpless

Creatures crashing onwards irresistibly to doom.

There is time for everything and time to choose

For everything. We are that time, that choice.

Bold was an atheist, so for him it was just a matter of 'we' and 'us', and no one else. For the Christian, too, it is choice *we* make – but in conversation with God.

When that time comes, then (as Simeon puts it) we either rise to the moment or we fall. If we rise, God rejoices with us. If we fall, God raises us up for next time. That is the God whose face we see in Jesus. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us,

He himself was tested by what he suffered (our first reading tells us) so he is able to help those who are being tested.

That's why this Candlemas Day we call him the light of the nations, and of our hearts.