

St Mary Magdalen Festival

Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Rowan Williams

Malachi 3.1-4

Hebrews 2.14-18

Luke 2.22-32

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Luke's Gospel is a very well organised text. It begins and it ends in the temple. And the beginning of Luke's Gospel is itself a cycle of stories beginning and ending in the temple. Luke frames the whole of his story of Jesus in the context of what the temple is, and means, in the life of God's people. The temple is the place where God sets His Name. The temple is the place where God's glory is manifest— so intensely, we're told in Second Chronicles, that at its consecration the

priests could not stand because of the glory of the Lord. The intensity of God's presence was such that human beings could barely breathe when it was there. Luke, in other words, wants us at every point to see the life of Jesus in that context of the overwhelming glory of God and God's proclamation of who he is, God's speaking of His Name which occurs constantly in the life and worship of the temple. So where Jesus is, there is the glory—the choking, overwhelming glory—of God's radiance. And where Jesus is in His Church, that same overwhelming radiance is at work. It may not always feel like it as we look around the Church we know and love. And yet, as surely as in the temple, that pressure of divine presence, and divine self-giving, is everywhere.

But as Luke tells us this particular temple story, this particular incident at the beginning of Jesus' life, another theme comes in—a theme most richly developed in St John's Gospel. Jesus fulfils the destiny of God's people to be a light to the nations, and to be the glory of Israel [Luke 2:32]. But that's to say that the glory of Israel is in its being a light to the nations—the

glory, the radiance and beauty of God's people is that they are there *for the world*, not for themselves. In the prophecies of Second Isaiah this comes up again and again. God has called His people for the sake of all human communities, and the glory and radiance that lives among God's people is there so that others may see, and know, and be brought home to God. And perhaps that's why Simeon goes on to say (when he's finished the *Nunc Dimmitis*) that a sword will pierce the heart of Mary, that the hearts of many will be exposed, their faults laid bare. Because, to be there on behalf of the world, not on behalf of ourselves, is a testing and difficult matter. God invites us into His presence, God shares His radiance with us, God embraces us in the intimacy of His love, and the catch is—so to speak—that none of this is for us, but for the world, that we have to learn so to live in the presence of God, so to live in intimacy that that spills over in every direction so to bring hope, and healing, to the entire human family.

It's significant that when the writer to the Hebrews reflects on Jesus and the temple, and the presentation

of our flesh in the heart of God, he speaks precisely of that solidarity with all human experience which is Jesus' life and the life also of Jesus' Church. We are not here for ourselves, we are here to live *in communion*—with all God's children scattered abroad, with all the human family in need of healing and reconciliation, in need of being brought home into love. No wonder that can feel like a sword. We would like to stay in that Presence and absorb that radiance. We would like, in our worst moments, to feel that it's a sign that God thinks more highly of us than he does of the rest of the world (a singular lapse of taste on God's part if it were true). But, the fact is, that all that is given us is given *to be given*—not to be hoarded, not to be sat on, not for our self-congratulation. If we are to share glory, it is Christ's glory—the glory of gift, the glory of *being there* for the world, that glory which in St John's Gospel is inseparably bound up with Jesus' self-offering, Jesus' suffering. As Judas leaves the room at the Last Supper, Jesus turns to his disciples and says “now is the Son of Man glorified” [John 13:31]; now is the presence of God most fully at work, most fully alive, in moment of isolation, and cost, and self-giving. A sword; a moment that feels like division, that feels like crisis, that

projects us out into the world of risk and uncertainty again, just when we thought it was safe to pull up that blankets.

And that's the paradox and the mystery out of which the Church continues to live, drawn into the very deepest mystery of God's love and in that very moment poured out for the sake of the world. The great 12th century writer¹ summed it up wonderfully, epigrammatically: "the love of truth drives us from the world to God, the truth of love drives us from God to the world." And there it is, in a nutshell. The love of truth draws us towards the mystery, the sanctuary, the holy place, the intimacies of God's heart; the very truth and passion, the burning self-giving that is God pours us out, drives us out, into the world, to be there for the world's sake. To say to the world: it is not abandoned, it is not worthless. To say to the world: God is always at its heart. And because we have been drawn into the mystery of God, we are prepared to live at the heart of humanity, sharing its pain, proclaiming hope, enacting healing. "The thoughts of many hearts shall be

¹ Editor's note: William of St Thierry

revealed,” [Luke 2:35] says Simeon, because, as we might say to God, “well, when you put it like that.” In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ presence catalyses reactions for and against, violent reactions for and against. We thought that the fulfilment of God’s promise would be a moment of homecoming and peace, and we find it’s a moment that pierces to the heart of our being, asking us “do we really want to be with that kind of God, or we happier being our own kind of human being?”. The thoughts of many hearts are laid bare. And the glory of God, laying bare our hearts, and the light of God’s truth in our midst, can indeed feel like a sword, cutting fiercely at the centre of our being, probing what we really long for, what we really value. Do we, at the end of the day, as believers—as members of the body of Christ—do we find ourselves, identify ourselves, recognise ourselves, in God’s own self-giving, or would be rather be somewhere else?

So here we are, acknowledging God’s presence in the Sacrament, coming to sanctuary, the holy place, coming to where God’s Name is proclaimed, God’s presence is real, and God’s radiance is poured out. Here we are

looking towards that strangest of all symbols of the Divine: a bit of food. The glory of God in a bit of food—food which exists only to be eaten, only to be given, only to nourish, only to enter into the life of the other. When we adore the Sacrament, we adore God’s presence in what is for the other, God’s presence in gift. There is no rationale in food except to be eaten. And there is a wonderfully comic substratum to our adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. It is right and proper that we bow down in speechless adoration of this mystery—and yet, how wonderfully absurd that we adore what is only there to be given and eaten. Literal-minded reformers in every age have said, “well, that’s nonsense.”

Unliteral-minded Christians—Catholic Christians, on the whole—have been willing to say: “Yes. Absurd. Isn’t it wonderful?” And only in that in that absurdity can we see the depth of the mystery of a God who speaks to us simply in being disposable, in being there for the other. *There’s glory for you!* (As a noted Oxford theologian once remarked). There’s glory, there’s the radiance of gift, there is the God who is there for the other. And when we not only adore, but eat, when we take that life literally into our own lives, that’s what we’re committed to; being at the heart of God’s world, at

the heart of human need, having our eyes opened—illuminated, as this feast so powerfully reminds us—to see where need is, to see where humanity cries out for our company, our healing hand, our understanding. In that, God's glory is poured out.

Christ lives, it has been said, simultaneously in the heart of the Father, and in the heart of the sinner. And that's where we are to live: in the heart of the Father, in Christ's intimacy of prayer; in the heart of the sinner—in our own hearts, sinful enough to start with—but also the hearts of all those who struggle, who fail, who suffer, in our world. There is Christ, there is radiance and glory; the light, not for ourselves but for the nations, for the family of humanity. To that we're called. And in the glory and the splendour of our worship here, the love and the joy that it generates, we have to remember at every point: that joy is for sharing, that meal is for eating, we ourselves, the Body of Christ, are to be broken and shared for the nourishment of a hungry humanity. There is our glory; there is the sword, and the testing; there is the destiny

we are made for. God help us bear that testing. God
make us bearers of his glory.

Amen.