

3 February 2019– Malachi 3:1-5; Luke 2:22-40

We are here, but should we have come?

“We are here, but should we have come?” These are the words which conclude the introduction to each episode of Travel Man. A television programme in which the comedian, Richard Ayoade and a celebratory guest, take a weekend city break. They try to pack as much into the time available as they can, finding quirky places to stay, and unusual things to do. They frequently challenge themselves to try new things, which often take them well outside their comfort zone.

“We are here, but should we have come?” Is something I have wondered myself over the last few days. Maybe you have too as you try to negotiate treacherous weather conditions. On Wednesday, I rather apprehensively went to an adult tap dancing class. My first dance class since the age of 8. On Thursday, I went swimming, wondering if it would be snowing when I came out.

“We are here, but should we have come?” Is a question that the people gathered around the baby Jesus that morning in Jerusalem may well have asked themselves too. Each of them was there through faith, but in each case, that faith was manifest in a different way, and through this, each adds something extra to the story.

Mary and Joseph are in the Temple because they are faithful to the law, which requires purification after a birth and the presentation of a first born son. To us, a ritual of purification seems outdated and unnecessary, but, the fact that it is mentioned here, highlights the truth. Jesus entered the world in the same way as every other human being. In a way that is messy and undignified. There is to be no doubt that the Messiah recognised by Simeon and Anna was completely and utterly a human being.

Simeon was searching for the Messiah. He had been guided to the Temple by the Holy Spirit. He was a devout and righteous man, steeped in the scriptures, yearning for the time when Israel would once again be in a right place with God. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the Messiah. We don't know how old he was, but the implication is that Simeon was of some age. I wonder how long he had been waiting? How many times had he looked at a young man and thought, “Is it him?” Did he only wait in the Temple, or did he hang around the palaces and houses of the wealthy too, or maybe he kept an eye on the zealots and others plotting against the Roman occupation. However he responded to this revelation, we know that he was receptive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and when he saw this tiny baby, he knew straight away that this was the one. The Saviour sent from God.

Anna was in the Temple because it was her life. As an elderly widow, she would have had few options in life. Through praying and fasting in the Temple she had found a place where she was valued. She responded immediately to the presence of Jesus, completely caught up in the moment. You can see her hurrying over to greet this baby. Unlike Simeon she doesn't stop but goes straightaway to tell others what had happened.

The Orthodox name for the feast we celebrate today is, “The Meeting of the Lord.” The day on which God, through Jesus, is recognised living amongst his people. Malachi's prophecy has come to pass, God has returned to his Temple. Not with the pomp and circumstance described in 1 Kings 8, when King Solomon built the first Temple, but in a very quiet and unassuming way as God makes himself known to those who seek him.

We never know what it is God has planned for us. He doesn't always act in the way in which we expect, so let's just take a moment to consider what has brought **us** here today. Not just to this building this morning, which may have had its own challenges given our recent weather conditions, but what has brought us to this point on our spiritual journey?

What are **we** doing to meet with the Lord and to allow the Lord to meet with us?

Should we have come? – Well yes of course, we should take every opportunity to meet with the Lord, but we need to remember that this is a journey. Perhaps a more pertinent question is, “Where should we go next?”

Malachi’s words are words of hope, but they remind us that such a meeting will have consequences. As we each travel through life, experiencing its ups and downs, its joys and injustices, Jesus will meet with us, prompting, cajoling, prodding and shocking us as we are moulded into the people God wants us to be. Sometimes this will be a comfort, but it may also take us to places of discomfort and challenge.

Our reading today does not stop in the Temple. Simeon’s words remind us of the task which is to come taking the Good News of Jesus to all, across the world. Anna, who never leaves the Temple, starts straight away, speaking to all who will listen about what she has witnessed. Mary and Joseph return to Galilee to continue with the practicalities of raising the child who, in Simeon’s words was, “destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel.”

This feast falls at the time of year between Christmas and Easter. The awe and wonder we associate with the birth of Jesus gives way to more challenging stories of Jesus time in the wilderness, his betrayal and his death. The journey of this family, like that of all of us, will have its times of trial and difficulty. Simeon hints at this in his words to Mary, “a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury, in a reflection yesterday, says of this story,

“It is a story about growing up. Getting older. Living through painful times and suffering. Staying faithful. Becoming wiser. It is also a story about being part of a community that prays and worships together, and finds strength, comfort and encouragement in that.”

We don’t know how long the encounter in the Temple lasted, or what other discussion took place. Each of the people present must have taken comfort from the words and faith of the others. Mary and Joseph may have shared their experiences of angels and shepherds. Simeon could have shared insights into the scriptures and told how the Holy Spirit was working in his life. Anna may have brought over some of the people she had been talking too and comforted Mary, by telling how God had been with her through the difficulties of life as a widow in ancient times. Had it happened in Henleaze, they might have found themselves all going off to Costa Coffee to continue the conversation. The first ever Christian small group.

At St Peter’s we have developed a programme called Fuelling the Fires of Faith. We recognise that people are fuelled in different ways depending on their preferences and circumstances. All have an emphasis on meeting in groups to learn from and to encourage each other through discussion, study, prayer and action. If you have not already done so, please look at the Fuelling the Fires of Faith programme on display at the back of church and the opportunities outlined in the February Newslink.

If you have never been to a Lent group before, this is an ideal time. Living Fruitfully is only six sessions, think of it as a weekend break exploring a new place. Or maybe you are interested in the adult confirmation group, the art and theology group, a retreat or getting involved in some kind of community action.

Whatever you decide, I encourage you to take the plunge and try something new. Mark, Sarah and I, as well as any of the group leaders, will be very happy to chat if you have any concerns or requirements.

There is always uncertainty when trying new things. My own anxieties about making a fool of myself (tap dancing) or being uncomfortable in the cold, were both unfounded. I’m sure that when you do step out of your comfort zone, you too will be pleased that you came.

Kathy Kilgour February 2019