

## THE UP AND THE DOWN

Eucharist, St Mary Magdalene's, Leintwardine, Candlemas, 2 February, 2014  
Address by Sir Leslie Fielding, Reader Emeritus

The Church Calendar moves on, establishing a pattern in our devotional lives. Six weeks ago, we celebrated God's Incarnation, in the person of the Infant Jesus. Soon, we shall be entering the Penitential season of Lent, as we approach Easter, the execution of the adult Jesus and his glorious Resurrection from the dead. But, for the present, we are still with the Babe of Bethlehem.

In accordance with Jewish Law at that time, forty days after the birth of Jesus, his Mother went up to the Temple in Jerusalem with Joseph, to dedicate her first born male child to the Lord. This "presentation" has been celebrated as a Feast Day in the Church since as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century and probably earlier. Since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, it has sometimes also been called "Candlemas", with hundreds of candles lit to mark the entry into the Temple of the "True Light".

In today's gospel, the prophet Simeon does speak of the deliverance of all nations. But he also tells Mary that her child is destined to be a sign that some people will reject. Many in Israel will stand or fall because of him.

What are we to make of this? In Leintwardine, in 2014, one thing we do know, from the flickering screen, the radio and the press, is that stocks and shares rise and fall; that politicians' careers rise and fall; that even the mean temperatures of the climate rise and fall. We are now becoming quite accustomed to fluctuations in our environment and culture. Clever people try and explain to us why it is happening; the cleverest of all try to tell us what is *going* to happen. Brave of them. Secular prophesy is a dangerous business. Even the best people can get things wrong more often than they get them right.

Prophesy in the Bible is different in one respect. The judgement that a prophesy contains has an application that speaks to the heart of the context the prophet is addressing – but that also speaks to lives in different places and in different times. What was prophetically true in Israel in 4 BC, and 70 AD, will also be true in Shropshire at Candlemas in 2014.

In 4 BC, or a year either side, when Jesus is presented in the Temple, St Luke tells us that Simeon, an elderly praying man, imbued with the gift of prophesy, and guided by the Holy Spirit, recognises the promised Messiah in this tiny child. He bursts into a song of praise – his long waiting is over – and then a brief Haiku-like reflection, on the effect or impact the child is going to have.

Simeon looks at the politics of his time, and also ours, with the eyes of a prophet. He says that the life of Jesus is destined to "cause the rise and fall of many in Israel...because of him, the inner thoughts of many will be revealed."

And so indeed it turned out. Twelve ordinary Jews were hand-picked to become apostles and their names live on as the foundation of the Apostolic Church to this day. Jerusalem itself would fall to the ground so that not one stone was left on another, as it rejected the Lamb of

God and looked instead for a Lion of Judah – provoking Rome in 70AD into the harshest of punitive reactions.

And the rise and the fall continues. It is a historical fact that Jesus has acted as a catalyst in the lives of all who really encounter Him. Look at the lives of meteoric transformation, from the relatively ordinary into mega stars of history, of St Paul, St Augustine, St Francis of Assisi. Note also the corruption and collapse of people and movements who refused the call to repentance and purity.

And so we see a pattern that applies to us as much as it has applied to others in years gone by. Rise and fall is a pattern that defines our lives too.

For many of us, this is the experience of trying to make life work on our own secular and selfish terms and of then promptly ‘falling’ flat on our faces time after time in the things that matter, like love, hope and forgiveness, things which are intended to draw us into being more serious about our relationship with the Lamb of God. We fall. But then we find that, if we turn to Him, He will lift us to our feet.

“Come unto me, all you who labour and are heavy laden...and I will give you rest”. To be a Christian is to be lifted to our feet and to have the burden of impossible expectation and demand lifted from our shoulders. (Incidentally, I recommend, on this, the very up-to-date and trendy book by Sally’s and my family friend and former child-minder, Francis Spufford. It is entitled “Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense”.)

For so many people, the route to Christ is littered with the wreckage of their own plans and attempts to make life work on their own terms – only to find that life will only really work on *His* terms. ‘Follow the Makers’s instructions’ has always been more sensible than ignoring them.

In our Liturgy today, we repeat the pattern of the experience that marks our lives. “We have done the things we ought not to have done. We have left undone those things we ought to have done”. We have stumbled. Morally, spiritually, emotionally, we have fallen; and we have come here, into the presence of the living Christ, to ask Him to lift us to our feet – yet again – with His forgiveness, His love, His kindness and His Holy Spirit. Absolution is the lifting again, after the Fall. Absolution is the medicine of love applied to the wound of selfishness. This pattern of falling, being forgiven and set on our feet yet again, is part of the daily rhythm of following Christ, of loving Christ, of being loved by Christ.

One day, of course, we will fall and not get up. Not figuratively, but literally. Our bodies, exhausted, will give way. Part of us is frightened (even terrified) at the prospect of this final collapse. Death is our last enemy. But part of us knows and clings to the knowledge that this will be the moment when we are finally and fully lifted up into Love – forever. Rising from the dead, Jesus lives out in front of our eyes the promise that defines our lives. He will lift us into the joy, the promise, the fulfillment of heaven – loving as we are loved, knowing as we are known.

Each festival of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church offers to deepen the rhythm of our dance with God – to teach our faltering steps a dance that offers a firmer footing. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Candlemas – is a festival which serves to remind us

that whatever goes down will be brought up, restored, mended, healed, if it is placed in the hands of God.

Down in the East London Docks, in the 1950s, where I was briefly a 'supply teacher' in a state primary school, there used to be a routine reply to the question – "How you doin' Guv?" That answer was often " O, you know, mate – Tower Bridge, Tower Bridge!" Which meant "up and down". Candlemas comes to us today with the promise that, when placed in the hands of God, and tied to the mercy of Christ, the Light of the World, we will eventually be lifted up – for ever. Amen.