

Candlemas (the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple)

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey, by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, on Sunday 28 January 2018

Readings: Hebrews 2 vv 14-end and Luke 2 vv 22-40

It is perverse and counter cultural. It is also absolutely right that we do not give in.

Those two sentences could fit a number of different scenarios. You may already have begun to sketch out a few possibilities. But I am referring, today at least, to the crib figures, still in place under the altar table and illuminated to capture the attention of any who come into the church.

Today is Candlemas, the feast of the presentation of Christ in the Temple. It is the final act in the great drama which began on Advent Sunday – only nine weeks ago but already feeling like another age. Candlemas rounds off this great season during which our focus is on the coming of Jesus onto the world – his incarnation. This is when God takes on all the limitations of human existence simply because of his overwhelming love for us, his love for broken, fractious, foolish humanity.

God could, metaphorically, have washed his hands of humanity over and over again. But he does not. In the covenants with Noah, with Abraham and with Moses, time after time, we see that God cannot and will not abandon us. Even though throughout history human beings have done that which could so easily have been the final straw in our relationship with him, God does not abandon us. In the face of the genocide that was the Holocaust, it is not surprising that a Jewish prisoner could write on the walls of his cell, 'If there is a God, he will have to beg my forgiveness'. The same words could have been written of the genocides of more recent years in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Of course, I would rather that God had brought deliverance, but for transcendent reasons that are far beyond my knowing, he didn't. And there is something profound about the risk of being a creator, that creation has a life of its own.

When Pope Benedict XVI visited Auschwitz in 2006, and fully recognising the difficulty of a German Pope speaking in that place, he said this: 'The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth. Thus, the words of the Psalm, "We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter", were fulfilled in a terrifying way. Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid. If this people [that is, the Jewish people], by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone – to those men, [the Nazis] who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By the Holocaust, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.'

An American rabbi, Shmuley Boteach, wrote about a visit to Auschwitz a couple of years ago, 'As a parent the question [of the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust] was simpler. It's one thing to suffer on your own. It's another to watch your children suffer. There is nothing worse in this world than watching your children in pain and knowing you are powerless to stop it.'

And God watched, apparently powerless at Auschwitz. Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian who found faith in the aftermath of facing the reality of the concentration camps, came to discern that God is a protesting God who opposes the gods of this world of power and domination by entering into human pain and suffering both on the cross and on the gallows of Auschwitz.

Two thousand years before the Holocaust, God had seemed absent, in a land and amongst a people who had all but given up hope of the Messiah, where there had been no prophecy for many years and where the enemies of God's people had conquered the very land to which God had brought them out of exile in Egypt. And yet it was in this place that God broke into the world in his Son Jesus.

And yet not all hope had died. On the feast of Candlemas, we remember Mary and Joseph doing what all Jewish parents did with their first-born son. They brought him to the Temple.

And there, waiting, with their hope undimmed, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, were Simeon and Anna. These are, for me, two of the most remarkable and attractive people in the whole of the New Testament. They are the ultimate role models of growing old gracefully – literally, full of grace.

In spite of everything that could have led them to give up, to abandon hope, they were there, waiting and hoping. Unexpectedly (because they did not know when the moment would be), there before them was Jesus. And their life was complete. They saw with their own eyes God incarnate, God taking on all the limitations of human existence simply because of his overwhelming love for us, his love for broken, fractious, foolish humanity. It was true then. In spite of all the reasons why God should have abandoned us, his overwhelming love for us is a reality now.

And so the crib figures return to storage. We begin to turn our eyes to the cross, where we find for ourselves the unambiguous evidence of God's overwhelming and unending love for us.