

123rd Annual Council – Diocese of Southern Virginia

Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith IV

During Holy Week some years ago, my spouse, taking note of fact that I was more than a bit stressed with the task of writing numerous sermons, decided that she needed to inject levity into my day. One morning she placed a greeting card next to my coffee.

“What is this?” I thought, looking at a bright pink envelope. Upon opening it I found a card with a photo on the front. Taken in black and white and of 1950’s vintage, the photo showed a late middle-aged woman in a cocktail dress sitting blithely on the side of a living room chair smoking a cigarette. In the background stood a shabby Christmas tree wilting with tinsel and way past its biological expiration date. Looking at the details of the woman more closely, I noticed that she was sporting a new curl and set. She was also wearing a dramatically stylish pair of Mother-of-Pearl, cat’s eye glasses – presumably as a fashion statement. Her overall appearance suggested that she was an authentic member of the casual cocktail lifestyle of the late 1950’s – someone who didn’t have a care in the world because she had T.V. dinners in the oven and numerous parties to attend on the weekend.



Finally, while staring at this strange, retro image, I glanced down at the caption. It read, “To Betty Lou, Easter meant one thing”... With great anticipation I opened the card for the answer. Inside it said, “Time to take down the tree.”

Let me tell you, once you’ve met Betty Lou, it’s not easy to transition back to writing serious sermons. At the time, that was very good for me. It was also very good to be reminded about what we preachers are up against – the fact that for many in the pew, the transition from Christmas to Easter is primarily a matter of changing decorations.

Now you and I know it’s about more than that – otherwise we wouldn’t be here today – and this weekend as leaders – devoting our time to the work of the Church in Southern Virginia.

Interestingly enough, the feast we have chosen to celebrate has a lot to do with a transition from Christmas to Easter. It's called the Feast of the Presentation. It's a very ancient feast - one that the early Church celebrated with a special candlemass to signify when the light of Christ broke into the world. Within the church calendar the feast of the Presentation was also a spiritual pivot point – a time when the community moved away from celebrating the infant Christ child to turn its attention toward the story of the cross. Perhaps if Betty Lou had known about this wonderful feast she would have known when to take down her tree.

Just to satisfy all you liturgical wonks out there, I will point out that the actual day for the Feast of the Presentation is February 2, or this past Monday. We've just decided to celebrate it today too – which is perfectly acceptable. Actually, one of the challenges of celebrating it on February 2 is that it coincides with Groundhog Day – which at times has given rise to much confusion for Sunday school children and bad jokes from clergy about Punxsutawney Jesus.



But, all ridiculousness aside, what I find so wonderful about our feast today is that we get to hear the story of Simeon and Anna in the temple, the faithful servants of the Lord who have waited all their lives to see the messiah.

Luke alone tells this story. Here's what happened: Following the Hebrew law, Mary and Joseph have taken the infant Jesus to the temple to present him to the priests. It was required that all first born males be brought to the temple for a special blessing. The scene is a recognizably domestic one and in many ways reminiscent of a family taking their child to church for a Christening. It is a special day for the parents. Mary and Joseph have gone to the temple out of faithfulness, bearing their hopes and their dreams like all parents do.

Inside the temple dwell two special people – temple personalities. Both, we are told, are recognized by the community for their faithfulness and wisdom.

One of the great advantages of Google images is that you can sit for hours and look at any number of paintings of Simeon and Anna in the temple. There are paintings from the great masters like Rembrandt and Raphael as well as many modern renderings from unknown artists. Most portray Simeon as an old man – which is rather interesting because Luke never mentions anything about him being old. One also notices that as the paintings become more modern Simeon starts to look like Gandalf from The Lord of the Rings, and Anna like an eccentric retired professor of Women's Studies. Isn't it interesting how we project our culture onto biblical characters?

Regardless of how we might paint them, Luke makes it clear that Simeon and Anna should be viewed as *the faithfulness of Israel in caricature*. For Luke, Simeon and Anna represent the remnant, the living historical memory of their tradition. Both have lived lives in anticipation of better times. Both know intimately the failure of institutionalized religion. Both have seen the torah twisted and politicized. Both have suffered through the injustice of Roman occupation. And both share the same desire of the heart – to see in their lifetime the face of God’s redemption breaking into the world.

That moment when Simeon sees the infant Jesus for the first time and takes him into his arms is surely a moment of incredible grace. All the windows in Simeon’s heart suddenly get flung open. It’s a “*Sursum Corda*” moment – lift up your hearts! And in response, Simeon speaks some of the most beautiful, prayerful words in Scripture: “Lord, now let thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for these eyes of mine have seen thy salvation”You know all the rest by heart.

Surely few words are as beautiful or as hopeful as Simeon's. As Bishop Dietsche, my colleague in New York, has said: “His words reach down through the ages to move every soul and set of eyes to keep looking and keep searching.....Perhaps Simeon is the patron saint of all true seekers..... all who understand that seeking itself is a kind of fulfillment and who do not tire of waiting on God.”¹

And what should not be missed is that his words are recorded not as some form of shallow encouragement – as if Luke is telling his community, “Chin up my friends – It will get better - rah, rah, jolly good - Jesus will be here soon.” There is anxiety which overlays the story, anxiety which acts as a context for Simeon’s hopeful words and for our hope as well.

As I was looking at painting after painting of Simeon - most of which were very pastoral and very pleasing to the eye, I came upon one which at first disturbed me. It was a painting by the Italian artist, Andrea Mantegna and dated to about 1460. In the foreground of the painting, Mary and Simeon are involved in an exchange, passing the Christ child between them. There is a certain tension in the image which is immediately apparent. No one is smiling. And as one commentator has pointed out, it looks as though there is a struggle going on over whom will hold Jesus: “He’s mine, no, he’s mine.” What is, as of yet, unresolved is exactly who Jesus belongs to – to his mother who loves him so dearly and desires to keep him safe, or to Simeon who proclaims him the Savior of the world.

But, perhaps even more striking is how the infant Jesus is dressed. His little body is wrapped tightly in linen the way a body might be wrapped in preparation for burial, and the strands of the linen are delineated like the stones of the temple that will one day be destroyed.



One does not need to be a great student of art to know what Mantegna is foreshadowing. The painting, when fully considered, confronts those who would seek to keep Jesus safe, or personal or privatized, or those who would falsely believe that salvation involves anything less than dying to be born anew. Simeon's hope, and as Luke would have it, our hope, is to be no mere "misty optimism floating over a marshy landscape."² Rather, it is hope forged in the crucible of reality. It takes into account real suffering. It takes into account the marginalized and afflicted. It takes into account real failure – including the failure of institutionalized religion. It takes into account the world's need, and our need, for constant redemption. It takes into account what the poet, W.H. Auden says, that "Nothing can save us that is possible. We who are about to die demand a miracle."³

What I find to be so powerful and yet so subtle about the story of the presentation in the temple is the very fact that someone like Simeon and someone like Anna would ever *recognize* the savior of the world in the first place! After all, most temple-types who are steeped in that much tradition and that much law are usually worried about questions like "how are we going to preserve all this grandeur and keep these stones standing in the future? Or, "how are we going to preserve our religious legacy?" Most temple-types wouldn't even pay any attention to some low-income couple with a screaming baby. Their focus would naturally be elsewhere on more pressing institutional problems like fund raising or temple up-keep or insuring that the law is being taught correctly.

But not so for Simeon and Anna! They seemed to be focused in an entirely different direction from the temple-types. Herein lies the miracle – that someone who is so *of* the tradition could be free enough *from* the tradition to live life on the lookout for an eschatological God.

I met a man of the temple not so long ago. We shared a table together during lunch after a confirmation service. He had been a member of the parish all his life. He had served as senior warden three times. He had even served on diocesan committees years ago. During the lunch, I

enjoyed his company and I believe he was enjoying mine. After a few minutes he began to voice his concerns about all the changes the larger Church was undergoing. He was fearful of what might happen in the future. I even wondered if he was fearful of what the bishop might do to his congregation which was dwindling in size. Finally, he told me a story. I believe it was meant as a warning:

“Bishop, many years ago we had a young preacher here who was also serving the parish up the road. One day he told the vestry that he would like to change the service time at our church from 11:00 to 10:30 so that he could have an education hour with the other congregation. We thought about it and then we told him: ‘You can move the service time if you want and show up at 10:30, but know this, we’re not showing up till 11.’ And then he added, “That certainly fixed the problem because we never heard any more about changing the service time.”

There are moments, believe it or not, when even you bishop is left speechless.

Of this I am certain: even good, faithful church people must decide at some point whether their desire is to meet Jesus *before* they die, or whether their desire is to just wait in hopes of meeting him *after* they die. And here’s the rub: what we good church people decide will ultimately determine not only the quality of our lives, but the survival of the faith tradition that is ours to pass on.

Fortunately, in my experience, the majority of us in the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia are deciding that we would rather get a jump on things and start looking for Jesus *now*. For these eyes of mine have seen a small rural parish warmly welcome an immigrant Asian family into their midst. I have seen a congregation decide to change its service schedule to meet the needs of young families. I have seen a congregation partnering with their local police to improve neighborhood safety and community relationships. I have seen an art program for the homeless - a healing series for veterans - a tutoring program for Latino children. These eyes of mine seen a new young couple wait 30 minutes in a receiving line so they could tell the bishop just how much they love their new faith community - how deeply their hearts were moved by being so wanted and so welcomed. These are the things that I see and experience in my ministry as “*Sursum Corda*” moments.

Here’s also what I know from the Gospel: *Simeon and Anna may have had arthritic bodies, but they certainly did not have arthritic souls*. By some miracle of faith, both had made the conscious choice to turn their faces away from the “old light” and to search instead for signs of the “new light” breaking into the world. And this is why they still witness so powerfully to the likes of *me*, and *you*, and perhaps *even Betty Lou*.

I end with words from Auden:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes...

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now

Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.....

.....To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all...

But, then comes Auden's final chorus – please say it with me:

He is the Way,
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is Life.
Love Him in the World of Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Amen

1. From sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. Andrew Dietsche on the occasion of his Installation.
2. From memory: A paraphrase of words spoken by William Sloane Coffin.
3. All W. H. Auden quotes from For the Time Being

Images:

Greeting card: RedTreeStudios.com, DCIStudios.com

Movie: Groundhog Day, Bill Murray

Painting: The Presentation at the Temple, Andrea Mantegna