

Sunday 15 March – Mothering Sunday

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

I don't know if you noticed, as the Gospel was read this morning, the subtle reversal of the usual idiom in the words used by Simeon when addressing Mary about Jesus. We are, I suspect much more used to the idea of "rising and falling", for example Edmund Burke's famous work on "The rise and fall of the Roman empire". Television programmes about famous people who have fallen from grace sometimes use that "rise and fall" formula in their title. But Simeon, instead of talking about the "rising and falling of many in Israel" says, of Jesus:

" 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'" Luke 2:34-5

Then in the subsequent passage, which sadly was not included with our Gospel reading today, we are told about the prophetess Anna and we get a similar reversal of the normal "day and night" when we are told that she:

"never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day." Luke 2:37

These little words, "fall and rise", "night and day" might seem to us inconsequential but, because we get this reversal so close together and repeated in this passage, we should sit up and take notice. They are there for a reason, Luke includes them because they reflect something of importance.

For a start, they are linked to struggle and sorrow, Simeon tells Mary that "a sword will pierce" her soul. She will experience great pain, real agony, and the impotence of those who witness injustice but are unable to stop it. She stands with the mothers of all the disappeared and oppressed, the imprisoned and tortured protesters throughout history. We who live on this side of the crucifixion and resurrection know that before the glory of God is the cross. Before the Christ can rise He must first be brought low. Mirroring the order—down before up, cross before triumph—is the fasting and praying Anna practiced "night and day." We first learn that she is up all night

and only then do we learn that she is also in prayer all day. She is keeping vigil at all hours, waiting for the arrival of the one who will redeem Israel. There is no resurrection without the crucifixion. There is no unbinding without first the binding.

The fact of injustice, pain, hurt, denigration, want, and death mean that God is eternally at work to bring healing to all aspects of our lives. The Lord is at work in the world just as Mary sings about it when the angel announces God's favour on her. She gives thanks that God brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry, and sends "the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). All these powerful actions mean to reverse normal worldly expectations. Not in spite of, but because of struggle and destruction, the Lord, the Holy Spirit, brings consolation and deliverance. As we saw last year when our Gospel readings mostly came from Luke's account, this is very much a theme of his Gospel, a reversal of what seems to be the worldly order, in Luke rising must always come after falling.

This reversal putting night before day, might call to mind another passage from the Bible. I'm thinking of the Genesis account of creation where the writer tells us at the conclusion of each of the days of creation that:

"there was evening and there was morning" Genesis 1: 5,8,13,19,23,31

Like John's use of "In the beginning" at the start of his Gospel, Luke is reminding us of that creation account in his own creation account of Jesus, the Messiah. The act of Jesus' parents in bringing Him to the Temple, and their offering of a pair of doves also comes from one of the earliest books in the Old Testament, Leviticus. It passes without comment from Luke, but that offering is the one prescribed for the poor, those who could afford to would be expected to offer either a whole sheep or a goat. That might not sound like something only the rich might be able to afford, but it actually does represent a considerable sacrifice to people who scarcely would have had enough to feed themselves. The offering Joseph and Mary make identifies them unambiguously with the poor, perhaps it helps us to understand Mary's joy in the Magnificat when she sings of a God that brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry, and sends the rich away empty.

Each of the Gospels is not intended as biography, at least not in the sense that we understand the word. They are above all theological accounts of

the life of Jesus. Luke is the only writer who includes anything about Jesus' childhood. Apart from the nativity accounts (found only in Matthew and Luke in any case) this occasion, and the time Jesus visits the Temple aged twelve, are the only stories from Jesus' childhood. This account is included not to give us some kind of explanation about how Jesus came to be the man He became, but to identify Him unambiguously with "the poor". This is also a reversal of the normal order of things and it is characteristic of the God we meet in both the Old- and New-Testaments. Great kings come not from palaces and a life of wealth and privilege, but from the poor and humble. Remember that greatest of Old Testament kings, David, was the youngest of the sons of Jesse and left to tend the sheep while his older brothers were presented to Samuel as potential kings of Israel.

In Luke, the issue of poverty is much more than simply a "cause" Jesus champions. The location and experiences of the poor, is the experience of Jesus from his infancy. From Luke's perspective, when Jesus talks about the poor, he is talking about himself. The Gospel account is an invitation to consider the diversity of messages, voices, and locations among us as we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus as the Christ. It makes room for women and men. It makes room for young and old. It makes room for the poor, disappointed, and unsuspecting. On today, Mothering Sunday, we might, perhaps think with thanks of our own birth, our own mothers, but also remember that Gospel message revealed to us through the birth of a child, God's Son, and the good news of Jesus' birth: which is that all can carry the Good News of God's salvation, liberation and His continuing care for all His creation.

Amen.