



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 2nd February 2025

Readings: *Psalm 84; Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 2. 22-40*

Epiphany IV

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Well, Simeon is in the Temple.

So is Anna.

They are waiting.

Have been for years.

For consolation; for encouragement.

They cling to their trust in God –

that God holds all things,

that God will draw alongside,

‘suddenly come to [the] temple’,¹

and heal them.

It’s a hope that migrates;²

that won’t leave them where they are;

a hope that consoles them.

Being in the Temple seems to encourage their hope.

It’s a place with the capacity to settle their fears,

it alerts them to traces of transcendence,

it heightens their sensitivity to the holy,

it fortifies that hope.

It’s not so much *what* the place is.

More the way it enfolds them.

Opens their minds.

Draws them in

and sends them out.

Anna and Simeon aren’t clones of each other.

They’re a woman, and a man.

One was always in the Temple, the other had come in specially.

He was a poet, having a way with words;

she was a prophet, having words about the Way.

Yet both were consoled as they encountered Jesus in the Temple –

Jesus, the newborn, still in a manger, too young for even a crèche.

Simeon held Jesus,

and murmured, ‘Lord, now let your servant depart in peace; my eyes have seen your salvation’;

Anna beheld Jesus,

and spoke about the child to every hopeful listener.

How many of us are looking for consolation

for this time,

for this world,

for our lives?

For something to draw alongside us

to comfort, to encourage, even to prod, to exhort us?

After all, the consolation that Simeon sought and Anna awaited

¹ Malachi 3.1

² Currie, Thomas 2015 *Bread for the Journey: notes to those preparing for ministry* Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications page 203

resonates with our seeking and waiting, doesn't it -
seeking and waiting
for peace and freedom,
for dignity and justice,
for wholeness and hope
for renewed faith and restored equilibrium?

Yes, I imagine we'd be looking for
consolation if we were an ordinary citizens of Rwanda or Congo, or Ukraine, or Israel/Palestine,
consolation if we were recovering from those fires in Los Angeles or floods in parts of England,
consolation if we were hearing a diagnosis that asks more questions than it answers,
consolation if we were lacking the agency of which poverty robs us,
consolation if we are disappointed with what life does offer us and with what it doesn't;
consolation if we were longing for some gold to fleck life's grey.

And just as the consolation for which we long
will be different in each of our hearts,
so will be the way we encounter Jesus, the consoling one.

In a place of worship,
variously stirring an Alleluia, a Wow, a *Kyrie eleison*.
Hand holding at a bedside,
one hand with a canula, the other with a caress.
On a beach,
sand in our toes, sun on our cheeks, and breeze in our hair.
In the garden:
with Mary, we can find, 'the gardener belongs in the garden.'³

It matters not;
Jesus comes to us in legion ways.
All that matters is that they are authentic for us.
As poet Angela Leighton has it,
approaching Walsingham's Slipper Chapel,
'You start from who you are, and walk and walk.'⁴

That said, it is not outside the realms of possibility
that we will be consoled by Jesus this morning - .
that for us, as for Malachi millennia ago,
the Lord will suddenly come to this Temple.⁵
As in many a chapel, atop a fell, on a beach, at a bedside,
perhaps here and now we can echo Jacob,
'how awesome is this place',⁶
even if, to borrow from R. S. Thomas,
it is 'in hope one
of [our prayers] will ignite yet, and throw
on [these] illumined walls the shadow
of someone greater than [we] can understand.'⁷

Gathered in this temple,
our consoling encounter might be in
the elegant lines, and pastel shades,
the moving music from yesteryear, or just yesterday.

³ Leighton, Angela 1954- from *Canticles for a Passion – The Gardener in Spills* 2016 Manchester: Carcanet page 123

⁴ Leighton, from *The Slipper Chapel in Spills* page 126

⁵ cf Malachi 3.1

⁶ Genesis 28.17

⁷ Thomas, R. S. 1913-2000 from *The Empty Church* 1978 from *Frequencies* 1979 London: Macmillan

It might be in
the warmth of the fellowship,
the kindness of the concern,
the heartiness of the laugh,
the serenity of the silence.

And most intimately of all,
dare we believe that Jesus wants to give us a consoling encounter at this Table?
Broken bread and poured out wine
offering sign and seal of the One
who came then, and remains now.
'Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and, with breathless awe, come near;
contemplate the Lord of heaven,
present with his people here.
In the bread and wine, receive him:
Christ the Lord, whom we revere.'⁸

We seek this consolation?
Let's open ourselves to welcome the Holy Spirit,
whom we know as 'the Comforter', the consoling one –
it's the same etymology.
Rarely does she invade gracelessly –
though it's not beyond her.
She is more wont, though, 'to sit like a bird'
'brooding', 'hovering', 'mothering'
But 'enemy of apathy'⁹ that she is,
her drawing alongside us makes a difference.
She comforts us in our sadness,
encourages us in our despair,
prods us in our complacency,
corrects us in our errors.
She takes our half living and makes it whole,
our death-dealing and makes it life-giving.
Such is the consolation we await.
The consolation we are promised.
The consolation we are offered,
wherever our Temple is.

Come consoling one,
to this Temple where we call thee,
come, O Lord of Hosts, today,¹⁰
that we might join with Simeon;
'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word,
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.' Amen

N. P. Uden
2nd February 2025

⁸ from the hymn, *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*, Liturgy of St James, c.4th cent. tr. Alan Gaunt (1935-2023) © Stainer & Bell Ltd. RS 454.1

⁹ from the hymn *She sits like a bird*, by John Bell 1949- and Graham Maule 1958-2019 - CH4 593

¹⁰ RS 4.4