

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Epiphany 4C 27th January 2019.
Linton 8 am and Shudy Camps. Luke 2.22-40.

The gift of the old to the young

This year, rather strangely, we shall be having the same gospel two weeks running – the account of Christ’s presentation in the Temple according to Jewish Law. We shall have it next week because we’ll be celebrating the Feast of the Presentation (a day late); we have it this week because the lectionary compilers were obviously keen that we should contemplate this scene – and as the actual Feast of the Presentation is on a weekday, and thus in some parishes would not be celebrated on the Sunday, there would otherwise be a danger that people would miss out on it.

The Lord’s coming to his Temple – it’s obviously an important idea in Christian theology, and there’s lots that could be said about it, and much that may need explanation in terms of its Old Testament background, the expectations that Simeon and Anna would have been entertaining...and so much more. The Temple is a central theme in Jesus’ life and teaching, and in the Bible as a whole. Perhaps some of those rich themes will be taken up next week, when we read this Gospel again – but today, I just want to take a step sideways, and think about old people and young people in the life of faith – for Anna

is certainly presented to us as very old for her day and age, and Simeon is generally presumed to have been old, too; and Jesus – well Jesus was a tiny baby, a child in arms.

For Simeon and Anna he was sign of hope, a sign of fulfilment – of course, in a completely unique way. But for many of us, who are getting older ourselves, the young children, the babies in our families, come as signs of hope, and also, in some sense, of fulfilment. People want to live to see their grandchildren, and increasingly nowadays, their great-grandchildren, too. Those of us who aren’t grandparents may have other kinds of relationship with young children – as uncles or aunts, godparents or grand-godparents (if you’ll forgive the phrase) – or even as an ‘honorary grandparent’ – the local person who’s allowed to fulfil that role, when the biological grandparent is dead, or lives far away.

What might we, as Christians, specifically bring to an important role in children’s lives? Our faith may not make us any *better* at relating to the very young than anyone else – we may not be more patient, or imaginative, for example than someone without faith. I speak for myself, as one who’s not very patient, and sometimes finds it very difficult to step into a young child’s view of the world in a way that seems quite natural to other people. But what our faith does do is to give us a long-view, a vision of the scope and significance of each human life, seeing it in the light of God’s purposes.

We also, I hope, have in our lives the practice of prayer. We may not be so faithful in prayer as Simeon and Anna were; we may think we’re very bad at it, or that somehow

we haven't got it right. But as Christians, with a living faith, there will be somewhere in us that desire, that attempt, at intimacy with the Lord – the opening of our hearts to him, in however uncertain or stumbling a way. Although you may not pray in the way you imagine other people do – mightily and with discipline and a clarity of purpose – although you may diffidently hide it away from others in your household and circle (and it's surprising and sad how many Christians do) – I'm sure you *do* pray.

So, there are two gifts you can bring to children and young people in your family or circle: where many of them have parents who've drifted away from the faith, or may not have been brought up in it themselves. Firstly, *you* might be the person who can tell a young child about God, about Jesus, and his love. You might be the person who reads bible story books with them, or even gives them as presents – but, maybe more importantly, the person who's ready to talk quite naturally about God in daily life, what he means to you. Where an adult's questions or challenges about your faith might floor you, the openness and directness of young children can be an invitation to be open and direct yourself, and enjoy the experience. '*Unless you become as little children...*' says Jesus: Little children have a natural affinity for spiritual things, without cynicism, unless it's been fed into them. They can help us get in touch with our own spiritual selves, if only we give the signs and signals that we're interested in this hugely important side of life.

And secondly, you can be the person who prays for children and young people in your circle – and maybe prays *with* them. When I visit parents planning their child's

baptism, I ask them if they've ever had the experience of bedtime prayers, or saying grace at meals; sometimes a blank look dissolves into a sudden remembrance – 'yes, I used to do that when I stayed at my grandma's house', or, 'my Nan used to take me to church...'

Even Christian parents may be reluctant to see sharing faith with their children as their responsibility: a fairly recent survey showed that only 27 per cent of Christian parents thought that this was part of their task, which I find rather shocking. Perhaps, as those of us who are older have had a bit more time to step back from the hurly-burly of family life and think about it, we're able to see the matter with that long-view, drawing on that experience of living with faith which has shown us that it's God who really gives significance and meaning to our lives, who has shown us the way, guided and cared for us – as well as holding out the promise of eternal fulfilment with him for ever, when this life is through. Those of us who are older, and still held by our faith, will have put it to the test, and found it trustworthy. Isn't this a gift we'd like to share with the children we love?

So, let's not be timid about the role we can play for Christ in children's lives – and in those of older young people, too – by openness and prayerfulness in our relationship with them.

Now, some say that parents won't like it – not if they don't have faith themselves; but I think that in everyday life it's only the exceptionally fanatical atheist parent who would forbid you from being openly your believing self with a child whom you love and care about within your

family or circle. And it would occur to even fewer people to say you shouldn't pray! Yes, Simeon did talk about Jesus as being a sign that would be spoken against and a cause of division – but let's not assume too quickly that it's impossible to name his name, or pray that the children and young people that we know may come to see the light that enlightens all people. I think that in the spirit of Simeon and Anna, we may find as we grow older that we have a particular calling to be those in the world who speak out God's praise, and draw attention to Jesus and all that he means.