

Malachi 3:1-5

‘I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,’ says the Lord Almighty.

<sup>2</sup>But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. <sup>3</sup>He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup>and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

<sup>5</sup>‘So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,’ says the Lord Almighty.

Hebrews 2:14-18

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – <sup>15</sup>and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. <sup>16</sup>For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. <sup>17</sup>For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup>Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup>(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’), <sup>24</sup>and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons’.

<sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

<sup>29</sup>‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup>For my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’

<sup>33</sup>The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup>so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

<sup>36</sup>There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup>Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup>When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

## Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Around the Forest of Dean area there are a number of disused railways, and railway tunnels. When I was a kid I was part of a Crusader group that occasionally had weeks away at Ruardean, a village in this area. One of the ‘fun’ activities was to walk through one of these railway tunnels... without torches. Big deal, you think. But this tunnel was so long and had such a curve that for a significant stretch of the walk there was no light at all. Absolutely none. I remember the experience of walking into this tunnel full of the bravado of a ten year old, and it getting darker and darker, thinking that a speck of light will appear soon. But it did not. I found myself groping along the wall of the tunnel utterly disoriented. Great idea, but the tunnel wall had man-sized holes periodically along it, so that workmen maintaining the tunnel could get out of the way if a train came. So I would grope along, and then the wall would disappear, before moments later you’ve walked into the wall, as you veered into the gap, and then met the new restored wall a yard or two later. Finally,

finally a dot of light appears, so faint that you're not sure if it's real or your eyes are deceiving you, and you head towards that light for what seems like an age, until you break through into daylight again — and it's just a normal day. But it feels different, because you've been through the darkness.

I sometimes think, especially when watching a film like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, about what it must have been like to sail in a ship during a storm at night, before electric light. When the sea is high, washing over the deck, and the rain is incessant, and the ship pitching and rolling, and there is no light at all. How terrifying?!

Those thoughts on darkness, are really to draw our attention to how good light is. Light is so good, and so easy to take for granted. So when Jesus calls himself the light of the world, I think it's really easy to think 'big deal!' — until you've experienced real darkness.

Today we remember the presentation of Christ in the temple, also known as Candlemas. This marks the end of Epiphany, a short season marked by themes of light, hope, mission and unity, and all focused on events at the beginning of Jesus's life, or the start of his ministry. So on Epiphany Sunday we thought of the magi following the light of a star (or an angel, as I argued) to find the true light. We remarked that this revelation, this epiphany was to the less expected — star-watchers from far off lands, and yet God was revealing his purposes to them, that the rest of the world might know God's love as the Jewish people had. Since then we have considered Jesus's baptism just before the commencement of his ministry, and we have considered Christian unity. And we conclude the remarkable story of hope fulfilled. Simeon and Anna are both old, and have been faithful in worship and prayer for years. And they are the ones privileged with the knowledge that they would see the messiah, the Christ.

To many, Simeon's words are very familiar — "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Jesus is a light for revelation. If you have been a Christian for a few years, perhaps raised in a Christian household, the significance of this may pass you by. Jesus is real revelation, and he is real news. God's love was not known as fully, nor as powerfully, nor as well until Jesus's birth. Knowing God had been too hard, but now he was making God's character, and love and purpose known to all.

The light also refines. Light and fire are closely related. And while we can think of the refining process suggested by Malachi, and repeated by John the Baptist, to be an uncomfortable or even painful one, it is a good one. Jesus the light also purifies us, shining his light into the darker desires, the occasional violence of our thoughts, the judgement, greed or selfishness, and making it clear that this *is* ugly. It is not comfortable to develop character, but it is better. There's nothing quite like being filled with the light of Christ for throwing out the old and shining with honesty, humility and hope.

The light is not just for us. While we live by the light, that light is reflected and refracted in us. Because of the importance of the 'I am' sayings in John, I think more of Jesus saying '*I am the light of the world*', but in Matthew's gospel, chapter 5 he also says: '*You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven.*' This is really important. There is a lot of darkness in this world, and things would be much worse still if not for the courage of our forebears shining Christ's light into the injustice, cruelty, violence and poverty of their times, and making things better. Each of you, personally, is a beacon of light. Don't let that go to your head. Let it go to your heart, and then shine your light in the most beautiful, humble way you can.

And then there is hope. Simeon had been promised that he would see God's light, the Messiah. I don't know how God revealed this to him. But he waited, and kept coming to the temple until the day this promise was fulfilled. In a world of instant gratification, Simeon's patience is a lesson in the value of patience, steadfast faith, and hope. However dark things may appear at times, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

So, as we remember Jesus's presentation in the temple, forty days after his birth, we reflect on the patience and hope of Simeon and Anna, the refining that Jesus continues to work in our lives through worship and prayer, and the light we may bring into a dark world, carrying his light in us. What does that look like for you, this week?

Prayer: Father God as we have seen your light, reveal yourself ever more fully and clearly, and refine us as you do. Lord as you refine us, make us useful to you, that we may help to shine your light into the darkness of a world that needs light. Amen.