

Sermon on Sunday 1 February 2026

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Psalm 24 & Luke 2. 22-40

Candlemas: Consolation and Redemption

It's fitting that 40 days after Christmas, tomorrow the Church celebrates that moment when, 40 days after his birth, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple. They've come to do the devoutly Jewish thing. They've come for Mary's purification. In that culture, women were considered 'unclean' after childbirth. They've come to present the eldest male child to God as the religious law required. And they've come to offer a sacrifice. But it's not the usual sacrifice. Usually, it would be a lamb, but Joseph and Mary are clearly of the poorest class; for them 'a pair of doves, or two young pigeons' will have to do.

Fast forward and years later, of course, that child, now a man, would once again enter the Temple, this time to cleanse it, to release the doves of sacrifice, to bring an end to this paying for God, this purity culture which sought to earn God's approval with sacrifices.

Mary and Joseph would have been overlooked, or perhaps even looked down upon, on that first excursion to the Temple. Nothing to see here, just another poor couple with a baby in tow. Except... two elderly people did see something; something they and their people had waited centuries for.

Simeon, we're told, had been promised by God that before he died, he would see 'the consolation of Israel'; in other words, his Messiah. Anna, an octogenarian prophetess, who basically camped out in the Temple, received a similar revelation; this child will be the 'redemption of Jerusalem'.

Consolation and redemption. We'll come back to those.

In this unremarkable baby, both Anna and Simeon recognise the remarkable. They see a Saviour. And now Simeon can die happy in this knowledge. Understandably, it's completely overwhelming for the parents, who even after angelic visits and prophetic dreams are still working out who this child really is. Simeon's delight, however, is tinged with foreboding, as he speaks about future opposition and division, about a mother's heartbreak.

Footnote and fun fact; some believe that Anna and Simeon are actually the inspiration for the tradition of godparents.

There are so many powerful themes in this story. It's a story of hopeful longing and faithful waiting. It's a message to those of the Third Age which says you are not written off! It's a story of epiphany, of a moment where eyes are opened. It's about a light which is for the whole world.

Today we celebrate Candlemas, and traditionally in those days before electric light, it was when people brought the candles they would rely upon in the next year to be blessed in church. That's a heck of a lot of candles!

It marks a halfway point as we turn towards spring; a pause between crib and cross. It's a final epiphany to end this season of Epiphany.

But, let me take you back to that Temple. It was a place of extremes; daunting, with its huge pillars of white marble and shrines of gold. The air would have been pungent with the smell of incense, and burning flesh. The noise of pilgrims and haggling and chanting and animals would have been deafening. And yet, within this chaos, two people encounter their Saviour.

Life can sometimes feel chaotic and overwhelming like that Temple. Sometimes I wish I could put on noise-cancelling headphones and retreat from the madness. And yet, that day, within that madness, Christ was present. And Simeon saw consolation, and Anna, redemption. Could there be two more beautiful words?

The consolation of Israel that Simeon spoke of was God's promise through a Messiah to console his people; to comfort them within their loss and disappointment.

This morning, I wonder what consolation we might long for within our own personal loss or disappointment?

In Ignatian Spirituality (based on the practices of the 16th century St Ignatius), Consolation goes further; it's an active movement with God, and it shows itself in a deepening love or faith or hope or mercy. And it's big enough to hold every emotion. Regardless of what's happening, if I believe I am moving with God, then I am experiencing Consolation no matter how hard or painful life is.

If, on the other hand I'm growing in resentment or ingratitude or selfishness, then I am living in the opposite, in what St Ignatius calls Desolation.

Consolation is about balance and connection; it's actively engaging with the energy of God. So, another question; what deepens love and faith and hope and mercy in us? What takes us out of ourselves and brings balance and connection? Focus our energy here and we will know that energy of God for our lives, regardless of what is happening around us.

So, we bring to Christ our hurt, our loss, our disappointment, asking for his consolation, his comfort, but also his energy to flourish. Consolation is both a holding and a commission. Here we are embraced to be sent out to embrace others.

And then Anna's word; redemption. Redemption is about rescue and recovery from Desolation. It's also about restoring what is lost, creating from failure, making something beautiful from what is broken. Because actually, nothing is lost and no-one is beyond redemption's grace. And the very moment we accept this grace is the moment we receive it.

In this sort-of Temple today - where we too mark the transitions of life, where old and young come together, where, please God, consolation and redemption are lived out - may we have the opened eyes of Simeon and Anna to recognise Christ in one

another, and may we welcome that same Christ into the Temple
that is you and me. Amen

