

Our Gospel reading today, that appointed for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, gives us the setting of one of the best loved canticles in our Prayer Book, the Nunc Dimittis. It is one of the canticles appointed for use at Evening Prayer but it is also one that would often be read or sung as a coffin is taken out of the Church at the end of a funeral. It is a canticle of hope and fulfilment. For the aged Simeon, at the end of a long life of patient waiting, it speaks of a realisation that his wait was not in vain, there was substance to his hope. In the context of a funeral, as a loved one is taken out of the Church for burial or cremation, we commit our loved one in confidence to the love and care of Almighty God. At the heart of that hope is the declaration of Simeon:

*For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.*

At the heart of that hope is the child that Joseph and Mary bring into the Temple. The passage we read in Luke is immediately followed by a passage we read two or three weeks ago, the account of the boy Jesus in the Temple where he had come with his parents for the Feast of the Passover. At the end of each of those passages we are told of Jesus growing, increasing in wisdom and in favour with God. We have a picture of the child growing into the man. These two accounts of Jesus growing up, told to us only by Luke, for me emphasise the humanity of Jesus.

The early Church, in the period after the death and resurrection of Jesus, as it moved beyond the Jewish environment within which it first began to grow and

out into the Graeco-Roman world, as it began to wrestle with the relationship of Jesus to God, came under a number of pressures. Influenced by the Greek philosophy within which they had grown up, there were some within the Church who had as much problem with the humanity of Jesus as many in our day have with the divinity of Jesus. In their way of thinking, the flesh, the physical was inherently inferior to the spiritual. So if Jesus was going to be seen as divine, there is no way in which he could have been truly human. We begin to see the beginnings of this debate in the passage we read from the Letter to the Hebrews

*For this reason he had to be made like his brothers 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. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:17-18)*

He had to be made like his brothers in every way ..... A word that comes to my mind in all this is that of ‘solidarity’; God coming among us, God standing alongside us in the person of Jesus. Jesus in his humanity experiencing what it is to be lonely, what it is to be misunderstood, what it is to be happy, to laugh, to weep, to be abandoned, to suffer, to die.

This issue of God’s solidarity with us in the person of Jesus is one that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews returns to as he sets Jesus’ ministry, his life, death and resurrection within the context of the sacrificial offerings of the Old Covenant.

*<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)*

Because he knows, really knows what it is like to be human, what it is like to be me, he understands me in my strengths and my weaknesses, my faithfulness and my failure, he is one to whom I can turn in my time of need.

But this is more than just a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. This is a life changing, life enhancing encounter. The early Church Fathers had an expression:

*He became like us so that we might become more like him.*

Made as we are in the image of God, God enters into our humanity, so that we might become the men and women he intends us to be. This is nothing less than redemption. Like Simeon in the Temple we confess:

*For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.*

We have celebrated the birth of Jesus, as we prepare to embark upon our own journey with him through Lent and onto Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter, we identify with the words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews:

*and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,  
<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who  
for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the  
cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the  
right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*