

The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

Sermon at Matins.

Today we move from one part of the Christian story to the next. The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is a pivotal moment in the Church's year. The Christmas season has now ended, and we are – as it were – turning our back on the crib and looking forward to Lent and Easter.

And our two readings this morning very much resonate with that sense of changing gear.

The Prophet Haggai, from whom we heard in our first lesson, is thought to be one of the Judeans who, under the somewhat lenient king Darius 1 of the Persian Empire, were allowed to return from exile in Babylon and begin practicing their religion back home again. as it were. Haggai was instrumental in moving the Judeans to restoring the Temple in Jerusalem. And as we heard, what he wanted to emphasise was that the Temple was not only to be very beautiful, but also it was to be the location for God's presence on earth.: ***“My spirit abides with you, do not fear...says the Lord of hosts”***

So, it is hardly surprising that, on this feast day, when we celebrate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, we hear in our second lesson, from John's Gospel, Jesus referring not to the temple in Jerusalem being destroyed and raised, but the temple of his body – which will be destroyed and raised in three days.

The final act of the Holy family in Christ's infancy, was to bring him, as the law required, to the temple. But looking to his cross and resurrection, John's readers, are already aware that they are part of his new body, the Christian Church.

But now looking ahead to Lent and Easter we are also reminding ourselves today that the baby Jesus who was presented in the temple. *grew up*. Jesus ceased to be a cuddly baby and grew into became the man who invited others to choose between the priorities of the world's kingdoms or the Kingdom of God.

There are, of course, times in our life when we need the comfort and – if you like - the cuddles of Jesus. I believe that God wants to know comfort and enjoy the good and beautiful things in life as well as knowing the challenges of true discipleship.

This has come home to me on the streets of our city.

I love the Crew Clothing Company in South Street. Then, of course, there is Russell and Bromley, outside whose window I stand thinking *“Can I justify that pair of shoes....? No...Yes...No!”*

But then, as I walk up North Street, I often stop and talk with Mirella. I wonder if you know Mirella. She is a delightful young Romanian woman who sells the *“Big Issue”* magazine. She comes on the train from Portsmouth every day and goes home when she has sold enough magazines to pay part of her rent and feed her children. She can't eat herself until she has made enough cash to fulfil those other two priorities.

So, as you can see, in just South Street and North Street, I find myself reflecting on how God wants me to enjoy good things in life whilst being mindful of the other sides of life, and the vulnerability of so many of my fellow citizens.

I have discovered Chichester to be a city of great contrasts, that very much throws this into relief. And I am in awe of the way that so many of the “*haves*” take time over the “*have nots*”: those involved in “Stone pillow” being just one of many examples.

None of us are immune from wanting to hold on to the comforting, lovely – even cuddly – Jesus, and I believe that he wants us to know him that way. But he also presents us with challenges on our doorstep, that point us to the prophetic, radical side of Jesus, through which he also wants to touch our hearts.