

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	2 February 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Candlemas
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

The temple in Jerusalem, where today we remember Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus to present him to God in accordance with the Jewish law, was originally built by Solomon, the great king of Israel in ten centuries before the birth of Jesus. As a building, it was unique for the Jewish people: it housed the Ark of the Covenant, and was the only place where sacrifices could be carried out. At the centre of the temple, the God who had created heaven and earth was believed to be especially present in the holy of holies: the most sacred sanctuary. For Jews up to the first century, such as Mary, Joseph and Jesus himself, this was the most special place in all the world: the place where you go to encounter most directly the living God, present in his majesty and in his glory, seated on his cherubim throne.

So it was to this very special place that, in accordance with Jewish laws and customs, Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus according to the rules laid down for Jewish first-born sons. It's prescribed in the Jewish law that you would need to bring a lamb and a young pigeon for the purification sacrifice. But the law makes an exception for poor people who couldn't afford a lamb. They were allowed only to bring two turtle doves, and this is what we hear in Luke's gospel that Mary and Joseph did bring to the temple on that day. At Jesus's presentation, this detail speaks of a Lord who comes to his people not from what in today's unfortunate phrasing we call 'high net worth individuals', but from the poor.

And, as they come to the temple to present the child Jesus, Mary and Joseph are greeted by two interesting people: Simeon, and Anna. Simeon is a long-standing resident of Jerusalem, who was looking, says our gospel reading, for 'the consolation of Israel'. Despite Simeon's age, he does not do what those of us who are getting older often like to do: that is constantly think about how much better the past was than the present and how everything is just getting worse. Quite the opposite: Simeon, we are told, is a man of the future: he looks

forward to the consolation of Israel. For a devout Jew in first century Jerusalem, this would partly mean looking forward to the time when his country would no longer be under the occupation of the Roman Empire. And, linked to this, the coming of the Lord's anointed one: the promised Messiah. Simeon, though old, as one writer puts it, 'is a man of hope and expectation: he lives for the Redeemer, the one who is to come'; in the temple he anticipates the future with joy, waits not with anxiety but with hope for all that God has in store.

And then in Luke's account of the Presentation there is also Anna, who, like Simeon, also greets Jesus in the temple. Anna, we are told, never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. She is like a very devoted verger or cathedral steward, who just loves being there. In fact she loves it so much that, exceeding what we would ask a verger or steward to do, she has actually started to live in the temple.

Like Simeon, Anna is from the older generation. She is 84 years old: a good age today but a very great age indeed in the ancient world. These people who welcome and recognise Jesus are not first century young hipsters. In the case of Simeon, now that he has seen Jesus, he feels that he is able to die because what he hoped for is starting to be fulfilled.

This is what he says when we hear him singing a song that we know from the Latin translation of the its opening words as the *Nunc Dimittis*: 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word'. Simeon sings it at the end of his life but Christians ever since have also sung it or said it near to the end of the day as part either of Evening Prayer or Night Prayer as we do every day of the year in this cathedral. In his song, Simeon describes Jesus as 'a light for revelation to the gentiles and the glory of your people Israel'. For Jews in the first century and, in some respects also today, there was a very strict demarcation. You are essentially either a Jew: one of the chosen people or you were a gentile and outside. However, several of the writers of the Old Testament express the expectation that when God brings in his Kingdom, the gentiles will start to be brought into Jerusalem. Simeon in the temple sees in the child Jesus that this ancient expectation is starting to be fulfilled. Jesus is not only the glory of his own people but also a light to lighten the gentiles.

So on this special day at the very end of our Christmas celebrations, we hear of these two venerable and remarkable people who perceive that in the baby in front of them, coming from a no-account, low-income household, they are seeing something amazing and unexpected. The God whom they had through their long lives come to the temple to find has now come to be with them in

new way in this child who is presented today; come in his power and in his redeeming love. With them, we also greet him:

O Light of all the earth,
thy children wait for thee:
come to thy temples here,
that we, from sin set free,
before thy Father's face
may all presented be.