

Presentation/Candlemas '11 Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-18
Twente/Nijmegen Luke 2:22-40

The Child that Changed All Life

'It will change your life!' Prophetic words. Any of you mothers or fathers out there may have heard something like these words when you were awaiting the birth of your first child.

'It will change your life!'

I heard those words, and, like all first-time parents, I thought, 'OK, OK, sure.' I was prepared, in my mind, for the interrupted sleep, the diaper phase, the potty-training phase. I knew, in principle, that much of the time that I used to spend hanging out with friends, doing sport, or other hobbies, or reading books, or having adult conversations with complete, uninterrupted sentences, would now be devoted to one or more little ones. No problem, I naively thought!

A person I've gotten to know in the Arnhem area who has two learning-disabled children confided to me, 'On the good days, I say to myself, the best thing we ever did was have kids; on the bad days, well, I think a bit differently!'

'It will change your life!' Prophetic words, indeed. Often passed over as we embark on topsy-turvy adventure of having children.

2000+ years ago, a young girl engaged to a carpenter was approached by a heavenly being, who told her that she was chosen to give birth to the Son of God by the Holy Spirit.

And the Angel Gabriel said, 1:²⁸ 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Some parents have overblown expectations for their children. I will always admire one of my college professor's answers when I asked him what he expected for his newly adopted child. The father had an Oxford PhD, had taught at Stanford, and was the Thomas Jefferson Teaching Award winner at the University of Virginia. He said, simply, 'I just want him to be a decent kid.'

I doubt that Mary and Joseph either expected or necessarily wanted great things for their child. But the angel came to tell Mary that her first child would be the eternal King of all creation. I think that might have just made her a tad nervous.

For she knew, before Jesus was born, that this child would not just change her life, but all life on earth, for ever after.

He is changing lives today, still converting and transforming lives for the good, in places near and far. Not a week goes by that I do not see how Christ is changing the lives of people I work with in these chaplaincies, and also people we hear from in Britain, elsewhere in Europe, in Africa, in Australia, in the Americas, and in Asia.

I hear stories of how in times of grief and family tragedy, people felt guided and comforted in a way they cannot explain. I hear stories of people feeling God's healing and support because they know friends are praying for them. I hear stories of families facing troubles but also finding reconciliation because of the love God has deeply planted in them which ultimately overcomes conflicts they have had.

Of course I also hear sad stories of suffering and pain and death, of supposedly irreconcilable differences, of longstanding feuds. And I realize that God is still working on and with all of us. That his Kingdom is not yet fully come. But I also see signs of its coming around us.

Mary and Joseph brought their first child up to Jerusalem for a rite of purification and dedication. It was not unlike an infant baptism, in the Christian tradition. Much had been done to make sure the day would go well. The trip to the Temple had been planned. The two small birds for sacrifice,

the minimum offering that the young couple could afford, had been purchased. Mary and Joseph already knew their child was remarkable – there was more and more proof that Jesus would change every life he touched – the shepherds, the wise men.

And so when the faithful young couple entered the Temple to do their duty they must have suspected something would happen.

The prophet Malachi foretold that ‘3:1 the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.’ But it would not be all sweetness and light. Just as with the visit of the wise men and their prophetic gifts, this story too has an edge.

Malachi foretells: ²‘But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.’

TS Eliot once wrote: ‘Humankind cannot bear much reality.’ (*The 4 Quartets*). Part of the prophet’s task is to open people’s eyes to reality (R Fyall). The people in Malachi’s day were disillusioned. They’d returned from exile, but the old homeland was not paradise. They thought they wanted the Day of the Lord to come. But they did not know what they were asking for.

Malachi reminds them that the Lord will come like a blazing fire (as at the burning bush with Moses). Jesus, said John the Baptist, would baptize with fire and the Spirit.

Malachi says the Lord will come to restore right worship, so that what the offerings of the people will be genuine, sincere.

And Malachi says that the Lord will come to bring change, transforming lives and society, bearing witness against tricksters and against ‘those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me.’ The Lord will come to prick our consciences and to bring justice.

Old Simeon and Anna, who are faithful and spiritual people, open to God’s workings, see Mary, Joseph and child quietly, unpretentiously entering the Temple and sense that this is the moment they and all Israel have been waiting for. They are filled with joy and relief, but they also accept God’s plan.

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, ³⁷She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Mary’s child, God’s son, has changed, for the good, every life he has ever touched, and still does today. Amen.