

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DIOCESAN SYNOD MARCH 2014

I want to take you to a passage in Luke 2 which has a great deal to say about our diocesan vision of *Living God's Love* and the priorities of *Going deeper into God, Transforming Communities and Making New Disciples*. And I am going to illustrate these themes with three examples from *Saints & Pilgrims in the Diocese of St Albans*.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, his parents brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.' ²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' ³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 ³⁵ so 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, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She 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.

Underlying this account of Joseph and Mary as they bring Jesus to the temple are some profound insights that were to become fundamental in the first centuries of the Christian church.

1. The distinctive Christian attitude to life itself

In the ancient world life was cheap. A couple of years ago there was a programme on the television about an excavation of a Roman sewer – not the most gripping of subjects you might think for an evening in front of the television. When the archaeologists had dug down they found that the sewer was full of babies' skeletons. The unwanted babies had been thrown into the drains and left to die. Despite the romanticised depiction of the Romans on film and TV, they were in fact a brutal and cruel people. An example of this is found in a letter which survives from the Roman period written by a man called Hilarion to his wife Alis, who is expecting another baby:

Know that I am still in Alexandria. Do not be concerned if they all return and I stay in Alexandria. I ask and plead with you to care for our baby son. When I receive payment I will send it to you. If you give birth of a child, keep it if it is a boy. If it is a girl, discard it. You wrote to me 'Do not forget me'. How could I forget you? I ask you not to be anxious.

The combination of Hilarion's tenderness to his wife and callousness for an unborn daughter is shocking to our modern sensibilities. Yet infanticide was a common practice across the ancient world. For example, according to Plutarch (a Greek historian who lived around the turn of the first century) the Carthaginians 'Offered up their own children [to the gods], and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats....'

Tertullian, the third century Christian theologian, argued that what really showed the difference that Christianity had made to the ancient world was in the attitudes to babies. He described how it was commonplace for people to abandon unwanted new-born babies in the open for the wild animals. But convinced that every life was a gift from God and that every life mattered, Christians took these children to themselves; they embraced them and brought them up as their own.

We've lost the sheer shock and the amazement that many people in the ancient world would have had when they heard that God had been born as a baby. In the ancient mind there was virtually nothing weaker than a baby, whose life could be snuffed out in a second. So to say that the Almighty God, the judge of the nations had chosen to come to us as a baby, making himself vulnerable, sounded ridiculous. Yet by his birth as a baby God is telling us in the most powerful way possible that every life is important, every life is unique and every life is sacred.

Now this same theme was demonstrated in the life of Jennifer Worth (1935 - 2011) (Entry for 17 May). She was a nurse, writer and musician and her experiences were recounted in *Call the Midwife*, which is being dramatised on television each week. It is the story of her years as a midwife in the East End of London in the 1950s, working in partnership with the Anglican sisterhood, the Community of St John the Divine. Jennifer was a regular worshipper at Boxmoor in the diocese. Following her death in 2011, her husband said, 'She came to really admire the nuns; their work and their faith. I'm sure working with sisters shaped the person she became. In later life she was very devout. She never talked about it to anybody – it was something she recognised she couldn't impose on other people – but I think that sense of faith pervades the book.'

This understanding about the start of life is behind the default position of the Christian Church of being against abortion on demand and behind the amazing track record of running orphanages and adoption agencies.

What is so encouraging is that that same concern for babies is still shown today in the numerous parent and toddler groups, parenting classes, messy churches that we have in so many parts of our diocese. Now let me take you back to Luke 2 because the second thing that this passage shows is

2. The distinctive Christian attitude to the poor.

Let's look for a moment at Joseph and Mary. They had to come to the temple to make an offering for the birth of their son and we are told that they made a sacrifice according to the law: a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. So what the significance of that? If you go back to the regulations in Leviticus 12 you'll find this was the sacrifice that was required from the poorest of the poor. How out of place these two country bumkins must have felt in the midst of the sophisticated city and its great temple as they made their tiny offering. Yet within a few minutes

they discover that not only do they matter to the people there, but they matter to God as well for chooses the weak and the poor to demonstrate his love.

You see God sees things differently than we do: he chooses the weak and the poor to demonstrate his love. This was what the first Christians preached and practised. We still have accounts of the extraordinary altruism of Christians in the records of the Emperor Julian, ('Julian the Apostate', AD331-363). The empire had been Christian for barely twenty years and Julian wanted to take it back to paganism. To do this he attempted to set up charitable organisations to rival the Christians. In one of his letters he wrote to a commander on the ground as follows: 'It is disgraceful that all men should see our people lack aid from us, when no Jew has ever had to beg, and the impious Galileans [that is, the Christians] support not only their own poor, but ours as well'.¹ We find descriptions of Christian care in the works of St John Chrysostom (c. AD347-407). In his *de statuis* he tells us that in the third century the church in Rome supported no less than one thousand five hundred widows and one hundred and fifty clergy. In his homilies he tells us that around AD400 the church in Antioch supported about three thousand virgins and widows and that the church in Constantinople financed the care of fifty thousand poor people. Near Caesarea Basil the Great (c. AD337-379) organised a complete city of social service run by monks. The people gave it the nickname 'Basiliad'. It contained a guesthouse, a hospital, a refuge for the poor and homeless, an orphanage, a hospice for the elderly, and a school.

Now this concern for the poor is wonderfully illustrated in our diocese by Kate Smith (9 February). She was born in 1862 and worked as a parish nurse in Rye Park, employed by St Cuthbert's Church between 1908 and 1913. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rye Park was little more than a group of cottages inhabited by workers, tinkers and travellers, very few of whom would have been able to afford medical assistance. This was long before the National Health Service and most people could not afford any medical care, however sick they were. The PCC yearbook commented 'Those who have had illness in their homes know how to appreciate the help given at all times so readily by Nurse Smith. There are many who have felt that they would not have known what to do without this help. It is of course impossible to give any record of work done but there are very few in Rye Park who have not either directly or indirectly felt the benefit of having such help at their service at all hours of the day and night.' Kate Smith died in 1919, aged 57 and is buried in Great Amwell.

But of course still today there are many wonderful examples of how churches across the diocese are working tirelessly to help and support the needy. Credit Unions and food banks are two of the main examples. But also as a diocese there is an amazing level of generosity – the parishes gave away more than £2.2m last year.

3. The distinctive Christian attitude towards the elderly.

God chooses to use two very elderly people, Simeon and Anna to whom he reveals his word. We read of Simeon, an elderly man who is nearing the end of his life. He is given the words that have become so important in our worship. The words we call the Nunc Dimittis:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou has prepared before the face of all people.
A light to lighten the Gentile and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

And then there is Anna, an 84 year old, who spends her time day and night in the temple worshipping and now she speaks of what God is going to do. You see in our fast moving age with its

concentration on youth, we are reminded that there is a special welcome, a special place and a special role for the elderly as well, for here they are the ones to whom is entrusted the word of God.

One of the many examples of the role of the elderly in the book is a redoubtable woman Hannah Buxton (20 March). Towards the end of her life, when she was fairly infirm in 1868, she wrote to her grandson as they moved into Easneye Mansion near Ware that the house 'might ever inhabited by faithful servants of God... that Christ might be honoured and served there... and that this place be a fountain of blessing to the church and to the world.' Little did she know that the house was later to become the home of All Nations Christian College, which for many years has been one of the most important training colleges for Christian missionaries in the United Kingdom.

This understanding of God's concern for the elderly is behind the general Christian unease about assisted suicide and is also behind huge growth in the hospice movement. Most Christians don't want to build ever newer and fast departure lounges for the elderly but would rather invest in first class palliative care for those approaching the end of their lives.

In the past year I've visited a number of groups run by the elderly for the elderly. As well as the usual lunch clubs, there are some churches which run Pilates, aerobics, and others who host a whole programme of talks and lectures. Having said all that, I think this is an area that we need to do more about as a diocese as the number of older folk is going to increase rapidly and there are going to be endless opportunities.

So to summarize, in a culture where babies were dispensable, where the poor were marginalised, where the elderly were patronised the first Christians were radical and subversive. They lived out God's love in practical ways, transforming communities and making new disciples because of the winsomeness of their words and their actions. Convinced that life was a gift from God and that every human being had been created in the likeness and image of God, everyone was valued: young and old, rich and poor, slave and free.

ⁱ Letter 22