



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Sunday 1 February 2026

Malachi 3.1-5; Heb.2.14-end; Luke 2.22-40

The Very Revd Dr Jessica Martin

Dean of Chelmsford

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. [Heb.2.18]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The awe and majesty of God cannot be expressed through the human signs of power. When we try to imagine God's glory we often borrow those human signs – splendidly decorated clothes, magnificent buildings, the bodily movements of respect, like bowing or kneeling – but that is because we do not really know what else to do when we meet the divine. God's majesty is not confined by, or anything like, anything like the structures of human power. When we are blessed enough to know and feel his presence we encounter something unlike any feeling another human being can give us; for God is God, not a bigger copy of something we already know. God's nearness may speak to us of wonder and even of danger – for in God we will be changed - but never of the structures of human fear or human dominance.

During these last forty days we have learnt this of the divine being: that God shows himself in a homeless infant; that God shows himself to the poor and wandering, and to the rich and powerful who seek for his sign in the shining stars; that God looks ordinary, and vulnerable; that he wears a defenceless human dress and needs our care. 'The Lord will suddenly come to his Temple' cries the prophet Malachi, envisioning a time when human dominance and human cruelty will no longer mean betrayal, or the disregard for human need, or the condemnation of the dispossessed and defenceless. He speaks up for the widow, the orphan, the alien, and all struggling under bonded labour, and he imagines a swift reassertion of just rule: a good king, to make up for all those tyrants. Yet to this day we witness tyrannical rule; to this day human beings struggle under impossible burdens of labour; to this day widows and orphans are abandoned and betrayed; to this day the alien and the undocumented are made exiles. Now, as then, we live in dark, dark times.

Yet God's majesty has come into his temple. He has come, not as a ruler with swords and armies, but as one of the vulnerable himself. Simeon and Anna recognize in this ordinary, defenceless infant the saviour for whom they have waited so long. 'He will be a light!' cried Simeon, a light for all the nations; and his words resonate across the centuries and are sung or said every day in countless holy places across our dark world.

But what help could it possibly be for God to come to us as help/less in the face of tyranny, if we are already helpless too? What good did the coming of Jesus do for our evil, upside-down world? The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us this: he does not come as a ruler. He comes as a priest, and the sacrifice he offers, once for all, is himself. 'He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect'. For only by enduring the world as it has become, with our fallenness poisoning the well of justice, is he able to know from the inside, and thoroughly, how the world might be redeemed and justice reaffirmed. 'Because

he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested', as the letter-writer puts it.

But it's not just that Jesus knows what suffering is like from the inside – though he does. It's that, in embracing the suffering that must go with being human, he turns it from a meaningless injustice into an act of redemptive sacrifice. 'He will be a sign that will be opposed', proclaims Simeon, as he holds the baby and looks upon him within his Temple – opposed against all the structures of human power, all its dominance games, all its manipulations, all its calculations of advantage, all its readiness to seize, to destroy, to accumulate at others' expense. Before him, and before his readiness to give himself for others, the unsightly mix of good and bad in our own inner nature comes out from the darkness of our inner thoughts and into the light of his presence; and as it reaches the light, the darkness dissolves away and we are rescued even from ourselves.

Yet the cost is high. 'A sword will pierce your own soul too', Simeon tells Mary. She will be that grieving woman, along with all the grieving women there have ever been for their suffering and dying and dead children. It goes with the territory of love; and it is love that brought the majesty of our God into the world, a light for the nations, a star of justice and mercy, a prince only of peace, a baby dependent on our care in a harsh world, a person in need, a dying soul crying out for God, a priest broken upon his own altar for the sorrows and sins of the whole of the world, so that we might see and love and follow the good, now and for ever.

'The Lord will suddenly come into his Temple', and he will look like us, but the awe and the majesty of his goodness will heal our dark souls and fill us with light.

And now to that only good God, who knows from the inside all our trials and our torments, our greeds and our hungers, our sorrows and our longings, be all glory and worship, now and ever. Amen.