

Candlemas 2017

Malachi 3:1-6; Heb.2:14-end; Luke 2:22-40

I've always loved the Temple. Loved it since I was a boy. Loved its busy-ness, its beauty, the smells and sounds, loved the sense of things being right. Above all, I've loved its promises: that it was here that God said He would meet us. That here, through the sacrifices, the priests, the worship, all the mess and tiredness of our lives could be straightened out and made right with God. Here on this little patch of earth, that we could meet God.

And I've always hated the temple. Hated all the stuff that gathers round it: the politics, the power, the hypocrisy. The way people fight over it, the way people come and offer sacrifices that mean nothing, the way something so simple and beautiful gets made so complicated. I've hated how it all seems so distant from what it's meant to be about. Hated that all the promises seemed never to come true.

I go there all the time. But that day, there was something different – the kind of voice inside, the kind of shove inside, that just says 'you've got to be there. Now. Go.' There's no mistaking, no arguing – you just have to get there. And so I did, as fast as these old legs could carry me. And then I saw him, that baby boy, in the arms of his mother, his father with them too. There was nothing special about them, just another little family huddling together in the crowd – but there was no question. That's whom I was meant to see.

And what did I see? Too much to begin to tell you all now. Too much for me even to quite understand. But let me try.

I saw, first, that He was what it was all about. All the promises, all the sacrifices, all the Law and the Prophets, the very Temple itself: He was what it was all about. He was the one it all led up to. The glory of your people Israel. It was as if the whole thing was flowering, right there, in that little body, in those eyes. Do you remember long ago, way back, just before the First Temple collapsed, Ezekiel spoke of God abandoning it, just leaving it to its sins and corruption and the invaders? *Icabod*, he cried, *Icabod*: the glory has departed. Well, I knew, I just knew. In this little boy, the glory was back.

And that was the most perfect joy. My life was complete, right then. All I ever wanted came true, right then. But in the same moment, like a sword right through the heart, I knew - I knew the great sadness too. I could almost physically feel his future, the great rush of sorrow coming up, the great meeting of glory with what we are actually like. Yes, like Malachi said, God would come to deal with the wicked, with the bullies and the cheats and the exploiters. He would be like a refiner's fire, burning it all up. But somehow I knew, looking at the baby, that means pain, suffering, sorrow, not for *them* but for *Him*. He looked, there in his mother's arms He looked just like a little lamb. Another sacrifice, brought to the Temple. I just can't shake that sense. He has come to be the last sacrifice. The glory has come, and it has come to save, but like a sacrifice, as a sacrifice. I felt it all as I held him. A great welling up of joy, and fire, and pain. And I looked at him, and I looked at his mother looking back at me, and I wondered: does she know? When will he know? And I could bear it no more, and I gave him back and I stumbled away.

But there was something else too in that moment. I could feel *people*, so many people, thousands and millions, more than you can possibly imagine, all coming with Him, all gathered round Him. I had the sense that somehow, through Him, they were all involved. That somehow the glory and the sacrifice were for all of them, not just for us, for Israel, but for all of them. Thousands and millions, across the seas, in the far lands of east and west, north and south, in every place and every time, somehow wrapped up in Him, here. The light to the nations, like Isaiah said. The glory of Israel, and the light of the nations. God's salvation prepared for all peoples. All there, in that little boy.

And I tell you, they will gather one day, in a country far from here, and a time far from here. They will gather because of Him. And they will know how the story ends, how the joy and the sorrow came together, and how the final sacrifice made all the promises come true, how in that little body and what happened to it all the meaning of the Temple finally happened. How earth and Heaven came together. How sins were forgiven. How everything will be made right. They will know, and they will come together to drink it all in, to somehow put themselves back inside what He did. I don't know how they'll do it, but I know they will.

And I will pray for them, and just maybe they will remember this old man in Jerusalem who saw it all, right at the beginning, and they will pray for me too.

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