

Present

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 2:22-40

What does it mean to be reverent? It is one of the styles or titles ministers hold. It is the gerundive or future passive participle of the Latin verb *revereri*, meaning one who is 'requiring to be revered, worthy of reverence.' Just saying...Well, a boy can dream.

Reverence, for some, is the well-developing capacity to have feelings of awe, even fear and respect. For others it is an acknowledgement that we are not alone in the universe, and that we can and must look beyond ourselves. People can also feel a sense of reverence standing atop a hill or mountain and looking at the landscape spreading beneath them. Or walking through a wood or forest well-populated with trees. Or standing on a shoreline looking out to the immense expanse of the sea.

But always the sense of beyond, above, worthy or appreciation and respect. It can apply to the immense in the natural world – a waterfall, a venerable tree. It can apply to entering a church or a cathedral. It can apply to a mighty piece of music – Haydn's Creation, or Bach's St Matthew Passion, or Mahler's Resurrection Symphony Number 2.

Reverence can also apply to small things. The lit candles placed in memory of the Holocaust at the memorial at Auschwitz last week. The stunning beauty of a perfectly formed rose. The intricate detail of a miniature painting.

In the Bible passage from Luke the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple – a thanksgiving for the gift from God of a new life, and something more which was recognised by two elderly worshippers, Simeon and Anna. Simeon, and I hope Anna, get to take the infant Jesus into their arms. The old man and the old woman waiting and waiting and waiting for the thing God

promised, the 'light for the revelation to the Gentiles...(the) glory to (God's) people Israel.' The 'redemption of Jerusalem'.

Luke always likes to stress the continuity and discontinuity of faith, and what Jesus brings to light. The synagogue, the Temple, are the centre of Israel's hopes and affections. Luke's Gospel begins and ends in the Temple. Whatever distance comes between Jesus and the Temple later on, God has not rejected the Temple. Discontinuity came when the Temple and its priests rejected Jesus, and the light He came to bring.

Jesus is presented by His parents in the Temple. Jesus belongs to God, and here is an early blessing. Jesus the Son does everything within the blessing of the Father, and empowered by the Spirit. Here is the formal 'presenting' of Jesus within the public worship of His time. The Christ-child is offered up in reverence to God the Father, the giver of every good gift.

There are some similarities in the baptism of infants in the church. It is often, though not always, the father who presents the child to the minister for baptism. It harkens back to Reformation times when ministers conducted all parts of the service, excepting communion at the Lord's Table, from the pulpit. There are still a few churches where a little metal basket is attached to the lip of the pulpit, and in it a bowl containing the water for baptism. On the first Sunday after the birth of a child, it was brought by the father as the mother would still be recovering from childbirth. The father would stand beneath the pulpit, holding the child up to the minister to seek the blessing of baptism, a bit like Simba being held up in the Lion King. Also important at the Reformation baptism was the father making public declaration that he accepted responsibility for the wellbeing of the newborn infant.

In reverence, this *presenting* of the infant. Look at this wonderful gift. What will this life become? How will this child fare as it grows into adulthood. True for baptisms of infants in our church. True for Jesus as He was presented in the Temple seeking blessing from God the Father.

In Jesus' time a sacrificial lamb was given on the birth of a firstborn. Or, if the family were poor, two turtle doves. It was the latter for Jesus. Luke is making two points. First, Jesus is nurtured within the family of faith who perform the important symbolic rituals. Second, in the two turtledoves, Jesus is acquainted with poverty, He comes from a poor background, it is where He starts of in the economy of God's Kingdom.

Luke moves the story on – to say something about Who this vulnerable infant from a poor but faithful background is. Within the place of reverence that is the Temple, two elderly people had been coming to worship for many long years. 'Patience is a virtue,' the old saying goes. In Simeon and anna we find that their kind of patience produces endurance, which produces hope.

Both Simeon and Anna are people of faith. Simeon is righteous and devout, living and waiting and praying and hoping for a sign of God's promise to be with His people to come true. Anna, wonderfully called 'a prophet', also had faith and looked for God's promise to redeem the people. Simeon and Anna are among the 'pure in heart' whose reverence of God enables them to 'see God' when those around them do not. An old man and an old woman see in the presented child God's promised Messiah, Who had come to change everything for those who would trust and follow Him.

Old Simeon sings of salvation, the saving power of God, that has come to bring light. I wish Anna had been given a recorded song and words, but she is speaking, not just in prayer, not just in her own actions of sacrifice, but telling any who would listen that in this presented Jesus, God, somehow, is here.

What advances and retreats must Simeon and Anna have seen in their long lives. Hopes dashed, hopes raised. Promises broken, promises kept. Faith cowed and tentative, faith confident and doing things to help and show God at work in the world. As for them, so with us. Are we guilty of the sin of expecting progress and good things to be carried on in one long unbroken and upward curving line through history? Has the theory of evolution, ironically, programmed us to think that everything will be onwards and upwards, whereas the life of faith will show advances and retreats, successes and failures, high points and low points. Things sometimes will get better, but sometimes they will also get worse.

What Simeon and Anna and their stories tell us is that it's not the steady trajectory upwards that faith outlines; rather it is the faithful pilgrimage onwards, encountering life as it is with faith as it is – through the hard and the easy, in the belief that in God's time the journeying will end, and the destination God has planned might not be the one that we think we are controlling. We like straight lines and logical, linear progression. Neither science, nor faith, seem to work like that. There are leaps forward and fallings backward. There are unexpected dead-ends, and suddenly open doors that give us glimpses of where we will be going next. Reminders, painful and frustrating though it may be to us, that we are not as in control as we like to think we are. Which is why God's light still needs to break into the life of the world, our lives, so that we might see God's face. And we see God's face...in Jesus.

I believe it is that that Simeon and Anna see, when they take the Christ-child into their arms. The powerful, paradoxical face of an infant, Who somehow has the air of God around Him, and the power to do things for good and healing and hope in the world. As this presented, blessed baby grew, there was something about His face, His life, His words, His actions that makes it clearer that here was God in the flesh, incarnate, here was God with us. The light for revelation the glory

of Israel, the salvation and redemption of Jerusalem and the world beyond it. Here, for Simeon and Anna, is where their reverence lay, in the child presented and blessed, Who was to grow strong, and be filled with wisdom and show the light of God's favour upon Him.

When we encounter Jesus in the world today – in our acts of worship, in the beauty of this place, in the glories of the created world, in music and art-work and words that can be both magnificent and intimate at different times – when we encounter Jesus in the world today and know that something tremendous is happening in our souls, our senses tingling, our eyes shining, our hearts bursting, our voices strengthening in song or whispering in prayer – when we encounter Jesus like Simeon and Anna did, there is the moment of awe. There is the time for reverence. Are you ready for it? It might be...right now!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen