

So much of what we hold dear and precious in this life is vulnerable, fragile, transient. It defines our temporal existence and can make us cling, perhaps too desperately, to people and things we cherish. Most fragile of all maybe is human life itself. Let's ponder for a moment that little group of people gathered in the temple around the amazing six-week old male Jewish baby, his impecunious parents doing what was required in presenting him to the Lord, bringing their modest sacrifice. Both neonatal and neo-maternal mortality were a very real danger, especially among the poor. This young Jewish mother had given birth in circumstances less than ideal for survival prospects even by the standards of the day. Her strength and stay was a husband most probably getting on a bit, as of course were Simeon and Anna, the man and woman they met inside. This little scene, which completes the story of the Infant Christ, is the final scene of the first Act of his life, the last time we see the Little Lord Jesus worshipped and adored, this time in the arms of the quiet and godly Simeon. Four people, all in their different ways fragile and vulnerable, gazing at a new life, while at the same time contemplating death – his, as well as their own. The vulnerable old man, after his ecstatic utterance, looking at the vulnerable family, speaking of the utter vulnerability of the forthcoming Passion, of a sword piercing the young mother's heart. What fragility of human life is there in this quiet scene, yet a meeting so important in God's redemption plan.

The words of Simeon in the Nunc Dimittis have been said and sung at evening Offices, as well as at funerals, for centuries. They have a beauty, simplicity and succinctness which has made them enduring and memorable for generations. The oldest member of our church family at All Saints, aged 109, prays them several times every day. She is tired and frail beyond what she can express – but her old eyes, too, have seen salvation. As a lifelong, devout and lively Christian, she has for some time had a foot in heaven and enjoys a closeness with God for which many might long. When I visit her we pray the Nunc Dimittis together - a true blessing for me. I've wondered whether Joseph might have drawn similar comfort hearing those words – the message of universal salvation which God entrusted to the mouth of his faithful servant Simeon. The Holy Spirit gave him eloquence.

This beautiful, peaceful, final scene in Act 1 which completes the Christmas story takes place significantly in the temple. Buildings usually last longer than individuals' lives, though this temple building was twice in Israel's history vulnerable to destructive forces. The temple features in both the readings we heard this evening. In the passage from John, we have Our Lord's enigmatic response to those who question him by speaking of his body as the temple. God's very self, encased not in stone, but in the person of his son. In the first letter of Peter, the Church as community of believers, is described as a temple made of living stones - "let yourselves be built into a spiritual house", he writes - and St Paul writes to the Church in Corinth that that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

How might we make a link between the Presentation story and the extended metaphor of the temple? Simply put, the temple is where God is. Mary and Joseph went there to make an offering to the Lord. Simeon and Anna found there a closeness to God which enabled them to recognise in the tiny child a powerfully new manifestation of the one true God they knew. Their vulnerability is infused with, and made strong by, faith. That's what happens - where God is.

What of this temple here in Clifton? Let me tell you very quickly about an experience in another temple building not far away I visited some years ago during my training. The task was to produce an essay about worship of a tradition different from our own, and was to include observations about the building. I needed to find out whether there was a space anywhere set aside for quiet prayer or contemplation, and was told that there wasn't one. (I kind of got the feeling that the person I asked thought it a somewhat weird question!) No one could say that about the temple this side of

Pembroke Road. Not only do we have several quiet areas, they are also accessible to all comers for the greater part of the day, most days of the year.

We remember this event in Our Lord's revelation on this day with candles, to remind us of Simeon's words '*to be a light to enlighten the gentiles*'. The light which shines in the darkness; the Light of the world. Yet a candle flame is itself vulnerable and needs quiet, calm, peaceful conditions in which to shine brightly. No rough winds to shake the darling flame, to re-coin a phrase. In this temple building, because it is open pretty well continuously, people come in and out through the week, often looking for peace and quiet, a quiet space in which to light a candle, maybe hoping for a quiet encounter with someone or something that can lead them a little further in their journey towards God, towards Christ our Light. It's a splendid opportunity that's offered here and maybe we might think about how we can make more of it. We might pray for the kind of eloquence given to Simeon. The building is important, of course, appreciated by many both for its architectural beauty and as a place "where the walls are soaked in prayer", as someone once described it. But we ourselves, as individuals and as community, are called to be temples, with God at our very heart, our centre, our engine room. Who knows how many more blessed encounters as part of God's redemption plan there might be here in this temple building if we are open our hearts to being simply where God is?