

The Dean reflects on the nature of families and spiritual growth.

Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Candlemas

Luke 2:22-39

SERMON

There is a photograph that is incredibly precious to me. It was taken by a press photographer outside the Church of Christ the King, Leicester, and it shows two smiling older women in colourful aprons clutching saucepans and wooden spoons. The photograph was taken to accompany an article about our food bank and lunch club, and the two ladies were volunteers.

This picture has accompanied me ever since I left Leicester, I've used it as an illustration in job interviews and sometimes just popped it into my bag when I faced a difficult meeting and needed a talisman of encouragement. Jane and Caroline, the two women in my photograph, were my spiritual grandparents.

I did not know my own grandparents well. We grew up many thousands of miles away from both of my parents' families and we never particularly close relationships with them. So I had to find grandparents outside my biological family, spiritual grandparents like Jane and Caroline.

Both were of African Caribbean heritage. Both had lived lives of struggle and poverty. Both had emigrated from Jamaica in the 1960s and had made their lives in Leicester, working in low paid jobs in the health service while bringing up their families. Both were women of deep and humble faith.

When I arrived in my first parish as vicar, I invited members of the congregation to join me from time to time for morning prayer. Jane and Caroline took it upon themselves to do this faithfully. They got up early, as they had all their lives, caught the bus, and grappled with the complexities of morning prayer with me. I can still hear the cadences of their voices as we recite certain parts of the service.

After the formal prayers, Caroline would break into song, singing the Moody and Sankey hymns and choruses of her childhood. I saw a different side of this woman who was usually so shy and silent, but who led our singing confidently and unselfconsciously.

I was drawn into their families, particularly in times of celebration and sorrow, as we welcomed new grandchildren, celebrated jobs and degrees, and navigated deaths and funerals.

God honours biological families in the incarnation of his son. Luke tells us how Mary travelled to visit her cousin Elizabeth to share the good news of her pregnancy. In his narrative, we glimpse the details of the life of an older couple, the priestly Zechariah and the wife who thought herself barren. Like Samuel's parents, they spent many years waiting and praying for a child. God gave them a child, and a role in the nurture of Jesus' human family, supporting Mary and raising Jesus' cousin John, the prophet who will prepare the way for Jesus' ministry.

Jesus knew what it was like to grow up in a human family.

He also knew what it was like to grow up as part of a community of faith.

Today we see how Mary and Joseph honour the traditions of their community, by heading to the temple to make the prescribed offering for the birth of their first-born son, some six weeks after his birth. They brought up their son as an observant Jew, circumcised, taught to read the scripture, taken to the synagogue and the temple, part of a community.

Within that community, the little family will meet their own spiritual family. Spiritual parents and grandparents who bring new vision and insight. As the circle widens, generations come together and each brings something precious and unique to the encounter.

Anna, who is well into her old age, has spent years in contemplative prayer, waiting on God, looking for signs of salvation.

She takes the child, bundled in cloth, into her arms. Smells that particular sweet scent of milk and soap, touches the peachy fuzz of his skin, feels the weight of the child wriggling, allows his tiny hand to curl around her arthritic fingers and recognises the touch of the divine. Her faith is rewarded with confirmation of all that she has hoped for.

Simeon is often portrayed as a pair to Anna, as if he too were an elderly man who spent his days in the temple. But if you look more closely at the reading you will see that he was a visitor to the temple that day and his age is never mentioned. He is righteous and devout, but more than this, he is filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the work of the Spirit, Luke suggests, that gives him fresh insight into this child and his destiny.

Simeon sees that this child has been given not just to save the community, the faithful Jews, but as a light to the whole world. Simeon has a broader perspective, seeing the great sweep of God's activity in history, the realisation of the promise of salvation for us, so far away in space and time from this intimate moment of encounter in the temple.

In Simeon's prophecy the boundaries of the family are stretched even further, beyond the biological, beyond the communal, to the whole human family.

God is working his purpose out within these three spheres; our human families, our gathered or communal families, and the whole human family. In each of these settings there are relationships that can shape our faith help us to know God's purpose and to enact it in our own lives.

My spiritual grannies, Jane and Caroline, took a risk in building a relationship with a woman of a different generation with very different life experiences. I learned more from them than they will ever know. They were an unexpected gift from God, Spirit filled, courageous and funny, yet humble and unassuming. That photograph is so rare not least because they were people who mostly preferred to stay in the background and were shy of speaking in public. Both have now died, but they would be astonished to know that I was still telling their stories more than ten years after I first met them.

We are blessed in this community with so many faithful and committed Christians, people who, like Anna, have a lifetime of prayer behind them. Are we listening to them and learning from them? Are we looking to see what they see?

What about the Simeon's among us, the activists and the prophets, the people with fresh insights and depth of understanding of God?

Today, let us not only give thanks for people in the three spheres of human relationship, but look out for opportunities to learn from each other, to be built up into the family of the church in this place and the wider world.

Amen