

LAW AND SPIRIT

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

I SAID quite a lot on Sunday, about the Presentation of the Lord in the temple, when the same Gospel reading was proclaimed, so I won't repeat all that I said then, nor will I embark on a wholly new theme tonight. I spoke about those six faithful figures of St Luke's infancy narratives: Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth; Joseph and his wife Mary; Simeon and his fellow-worshipper Anna; and we noted how one in each pair sang a canticle which has come down to us through the centuries, Zechariah's Benedictus, Mary's Magnificat, and Simeon's Nunc Dimitis.

Let me tell you something else about them. St Luke, as we were reflecting on Sunday, depicts them as holy and righteous souls, faithful Israelites, deeply formed in the ancient piety of the 'poor of the land'. St Luke emphasises that they were all obedient to the Law of Moses. Zechariah and Elizabeth, St Luke tells us, walked 'in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord'. Joseph and Mary bring the Christchild to the temple to 'do for him according to the custom of the law'. Simeon was 'righteous and devout' and Anna worshipped 'with fasting and prayer night and day'. These people are traditionalists of the best sort.

And yet, St Luke tells us, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The angel promised Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Elizabeth, he says, was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when Mary visited her. Zechariah was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when he sang the Benedictus. Simeon was 'inspired by the Spirit' to come into the temple that Candlemas Day. These people are charismatics of the best kind.

Some people try to drive a wedge between the Law and the Spirit, a religion of dull obligation on the one hand, and a religion of joyful freedom on the other. I do not think that St Luke would know what they were talking about. It's quite impossible to read St Luke's two books (his Gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles) and find that distinction there. St Paul had much to say in equal measure about the dangers of formalism (Law with no Spirit) and about what is technically called 'enthusiasm' (Spirit with no Law). And sometimes he stresses one and sometimes the other; but in the end he preaches a religion of Both-And.

'Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was

upon him'. May blessed Simeon pray for us tonight, that we too may be righteous and devout, that we may long for the consolation of God's people; and may the Holy Spirit rest upon us.

PETER ATKINSON
Dean of Worcester

Preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral
on Wednesday 2 February 2022.

© Peter Atkinson 2022.