

Candlemass Homily 2021

By The Venerable Martin Lloyd Williams, Archdeacon of Brighton & Lewes

When our son Ben was born, I knew straight away that something was not as it should have been. I asked the midwife if all was well. She said it was. But an hour or so later, the paediatrician came to see us. He examined Ben. He felt the extra soft spot on his head. He looked at the wider-than-usual gap between his big toe and his other toes. He peered at the deep creases across the palm of his hand. And then he handed Ben back. "I believe," he said, "your son has Downs Syndrome." It wasn't a moment that you forget.

A few weeks later, while we were still processing this news and its implications, a friend sent us a picture of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. It was painted by Andreas Mantegna around 1465. Mantegna was undoubtedly a great artist, and this is a painting of great quality and beauty. But the reason our friend sent it to us is because when you look closely at the infant Jesus, a strong case can be made for saying that Mantegna has depicted him with Downs Syndrome. The painting shows the moment when Simeon, the old man in the Temple, speaks an ominous prophecy over Jesus and then hands him back to his mother just as the paediatrician had handed Ben back to us.

This started me thinking. Why did he paint Jesus in this way? Had he been commissioned to do so by his patron in Mantua? Did the baby he used as a model coincidentally have Downs Syndrome? Did he do it intentionally?

At first, my reaction was somewhat sentimental. In a lovely way, the painting seemed to suggest that God had a special place for babies with Downs Syndrome. But the problem is that babies with Downs grow into children with Downs, then teenagers and then adults with Downs. Its not something you grow out of. And so inevitably a new question occurred to me: is Mantegna suggesting, deliberately or not, that it might have been possible for Jesus to have chosen to have been born with Downs Syndrome without that affecting the purpose of the incarnation? Could the incarnate Son of God have fulfilled his divine destiny if he had been born with a learning disability?

Surely not, I thought. And then I began to wonder about all the assumptions I had made over the years about the nature of creation, how it was all about cause and effect and the principles of Newtonian physics, how I had essentially come to believe that life was a problem needing to be solved and that Jesus was one who solved it. And I began to wonder if I had reduced Jesus to the role of God's repair man. And I wondered what Simeon believed would be the result of the promise God had given him, that he would see the Messiah before he died? In his wildest dreams did he expect a baby would be the fulfilment of God's promise? And how did he know it was this baby?

For me, one thought led to another. Could I, like Simeon, begin to see things differently, see creation differently? Could I recognise the possibility of a creator God who is so passionate about his creation that he quite literally throws himself recklessly into it in the incarnation?

And he does so not simply to make a repair or to effect a particular result, but because he cannot bear to be apart from it, because he is intrinsically tied up with its destiny, because it is his very nature to pour himself out.

If this whirlwind of divine passion has as its primary desire the intention of drawing all creation and all creatures back to the source of all life, maybe like me you can begin to see a much more complex, more multi-faceted, more mystical process at work? Something that does not so much need to be explained as to be caught up in? And if God's desire is to elicit from us reciprocal love and fierce devotion, maybe it is important that he became incarnate in a way that draws out from us a similarly selfless love that, in the first instance at least, is not looking for the guarantee of material or spiritual reward. If God is calling us to love him for himself, rather than with the intention of our obtaining something, what better way than to come among us as a person with learning disabilities who, in worldly terms at least, can offer us little return on our investment. If this is so, maybe Mantegna is on to something.

In one of his most famous works, Bernard of Clairvaux says;

You ask me, "Why should God be loved?" I answer: the reason for loving God is God himself. And why should God be loved for his own sake? Simply because no one could be more justly loved than God, no one deserves our love more. Some might question if God deserves our love or if they might have something to gain by loving him? The answer to both questions is yes, but I find no other worthy reason for loving him except himself.

And so the old man, Simeon, was guided by the Spirit and he recognised the Messiah when he saw the infant Jesus. He had held onto, and lovingly nurtured, the promise that God had given him. To him this promise was a precious gift. And what had been nurtured by love and devotion in his life, issued in yet more love, a generous and prophetic love: "my eyes have seen your salvation," he said, "which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." Simeon looked forward and he saw that the Presentation of Christ in the Temple was a dazzling light that revealed an extraordinary breadth, a depth and a height to the generous love of God. Furthermore this revelation of love was so powerful that it would, he said, provoke opposition. And, of course, it still does provoke opposition. Both within the Church and beyond the Church the idea of a wild, generous and completely unconditional love that is a light for absolutely everyone is just too threatening for words and is consequently opposed. It is opposed every time we place the demands of loyalty to our denomination, or tribe or group higher than the demands of unconditional love.

Mary and Joseph thought they were coming to the Temple for purification, but they got so much more. They were introduced to whole new world of inclusion and grace. And there continue to be so many things that we are tempted to seek purification for, and demand purification from, when actually we just need to be reintroduced to a whole new world of inclusion and grace.

A tradition soon sprung up in the Church to mark this extraordinary and transformative revelation in a festival that involved lights and candles, and so it became known as Candlemas – the celebration of the light of revelation.

Whatever fresh thing God is showing to you in a new way, do not be afraid of it. Whatever new perspective God is giving you, maybe through an artist like Mantegna, grasp it. Whatever deep and hidden things, or prejudices or blindness God is revealing within you, embrace it. Whenever you find yourself tempted to oppose unconditional love, pay attention to it. For God's intention is only for you to be caught up in the whirlwind of divine passion.