

Christ the World's Light and We Share that Hope

28 January, 2018

Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Faithful God

Today you give us good news

Help us hear it in Jesus name

I don't know who invented the game but they had no regard for health or, as it turned out, safety. It was so much fun. It was my fourth form camp, year 10, and to make men out of us boys they took us to an old army camp on the shores of Lake Wakatipu. After it was dark we formed up on a huge open paddock and we were divided into the blues and reds. Each team got a flag of, you guessed it, blue, and in fact red. Beside that flag we had to light a fire. The team whose fire survived the longest won. It sounds simple, but you could use whatever measures you liked to put the other teams fire out. Quickly we divided ourselves into fire putterouters and fire maintainers. I had to go down to the river and fill buckets of water and then do kamikazee runs on the reds fire, hopefully getting close enough to put it out. Fortunately for us they had lit their fire beside some bushes. A whole platoon of us darkened our faces, snuck up and then, on my command, all ran screaming from different directions throwing our water. Kyle Jones forgot his water, fell on the fire, got 2 degree burns and had an asthma attack. Apart from that a great time was had by all.

I love the readings for today. The ancient Simeon and the 83 year old Anna holding the child Jesus in their arms, and saying "Now I can die in peace." The words of Anna and Simeon that day are songs of hope. Hope that in Jesus, God is with us. Hope that many will see God's love for them in this child, hope that God's love knows no end.

As in fourth form camp so in life. There are fire maintainers and fire putterouters. A flame is such a vulnerable thing. It doesn't take much to put it out: a puff of wind, a moist finger.

In haunting words Simeon is saying "Now I can die in peace because I have seen the light of the world. God has fulfilled his promise to me, my life has meaning."

In the vulnerability of a child we see God's love. Often when we hold a child we feel this for ourselves. I have the pleasure of holding lots of children in baptism. Many say to me it's when they hold their grandchildren that they, like Simeon, feel they can die in peace, their lives fulfilled. But why does it have to be this way?

"The only way," writes Richard Rohr, "for us to truly know God's love was for a shift in power from God's side and for God to come to us in a vulnerable position. Jesus is the living icon of this power-shift: God becoming powerless in Jesus. God took the initiative to overcome our fear and hesitation. Seeing God in the form of a small baby radically illustrates this shift in power."

To illustrate this point the great philosopher Kierkegaard told a story: Once upon a time there was a rich and powerful king. One day he was travelling through his kingdom and he saw the most beautiful maiden. He instantly fell in love with her. But what to do? If he went back to the village in his kingly robes, she would feel obliged to return his affection out of fear. If he gives any sign at all that he is the king of the realm, he will not know if she really loves him or if she is faking it. So he hatches a cunning plan. He puts on the robes of a poor peasant. He makes

himself dirty and spends the night with the pigs to really capture that peasant aroma. Totally vulnerable he goes and lives in the village. Eventually she returns him love. It is only then that he is able to reveal who he really is.

So it is with Jesus. Though he was divine he did not cling to equality with God but made himself nothing, taking the form of slave he was born in human likeness. He humbled himself and was obedient to death, even to death on a cross.

In the vulnerable Child presented in the temple today we see God's love. We see God's hope for the world. And in this Candlemas service we dedicate ourselves afresh to being God's light bearers in the world, to keeping hope alive and to keeping the fire of God's love alive in our hearts.

It's easy to let the fire of God's love go out.

I heard of a rural vicar. One of her parishioners had announced that he would no longer come to church. He felt close to God on the golf course and so would be going there in future. She visited him in was the middle of winter. The rebellious parishioner had a coal fire burning. Conversation was a little awkward. In fact they fell into silence. Then the vicar said, "Let me show you something." She got some tongs from beside the fire and used them to pull out a burning coal from the fire and sat it on the hearth. It very quickly went from red hot to dull orange to ashen gray. Within minutes it was cold enough to touch. The golfer got the point. "See you Sunday then vicar," he said. You see without gathering with each other week by week we soon go out. We soon lose the fire of love. Separated from regular worship we soon grow cold.

I wonder what threatens to put out the fire of hope in your life. Be assured the light of Christ is hope, even in the midst of our darkest times. My plea to you is, "Don't let the light of hope die in you." Renew it, keep it burning. Don't let others or events put it out.

This year once the candles are blessed I invite you to take them home. Light them when you pray and ask that you, like your little candle, might be sign of hope in the world.