

Presentation of Christ in the Temple 2009: Davos and Dendermonde
Robert Innes: 1st February 2009

The presentation of Christ in the Temple is a turning point, a hinge point, in the Church's year. It gives us one last chance to look back at Christmas, before we press on towards Lent. In our family, Christmas celebrations finally came to an end this week, with the arrival of a bill from Mastercard – an welcome post-Christmas reminder of presents we'd long since forgotten we had bought. Another bill to pay! Financial gloom!

Over this last couple of weeks, two very different kinds of events and two very different towns have been very much in the news. The first is financial crisis, the economic downturn, and the World Economic Forum gathering in the Swiss Alpine resort of Davos. For the last few decades, government and business leaders from across the world have met each year in Davos, the largest ski resort in Switzerland and the highest town in Europe. Their aim is as high as their location: to establish a corporate governance system for the world. This year though the mood in Davos was reported to be sombre. As a mark of their penitence, it is reported that this year the business leaders have even allowed the political leaders to set the agenda.

The other quite different town in the news has been the Belgian community of Dendermonde. the pleasant Flemish town lying at the confluence of the river Schelde and the river Dender, 30 kilometres north of us here in Brussels. As we all know, Dendermonde has been thrust into the limelight as the place where a 20 year old man slaughtered and injured young children at the town's creche. He chose as his victims the very youngest children, babies in their cots: a terrible, inexplicable act of violence.

It is with these two very different towns in mind, Davos and Dendermonde, that I invite us to turn to today's gospel, the presentation of Christ in the temple. This is for me one of the most beautiful and most moving passages in the New Testament – full of wonder, and hope and poignancy. Mary and Joseph, travel to Jerusalem to fulfil their obligations under Jewish Law and to present their new baby to the priests in the temple. The proud young mother Mary goes to the temple with her baby who is just 6 weeks old, and so still very tiny. Probably she carried him strapped to her stomach. It would have been her first public outing with him. Thus does Mary present her baby to the world.

I wonder when you last held a small baby? Last week we had the pleasure of blessing Alexander and Catherina's baby Amélie, at our 10:30 service. As I held Amélie in my arms, I was reminded of just how small and light, babies are. And as Amélie lay looking up into my eyes, I knew again how completely dependent upon us adults a baby is, for his or her care, and protection and welfare. So it is that we can imagine Mary handing over her tiny baby into the arms of the old man Simeon for him to give the baby Jesus his blessing.

Reading this passage again during the week, I was struck by Mary and Joseph's lowliness and poverty. The law provided that a woman should bring as a sacrifice a lamb and a dove. It was because Mary could not afford to bring a lamb, that she brought a pair of doves. The law also required that a first born son should be redeemed with 5 shekels of silver, but there is no question of silver being paid in Mary's case.

Then again I was struck by the disproportion between the little family and the vast Jerusalem temple. The temple mount was the size of 20 football pitches and surrounded by nearly 1000 columns. The walls of the courtyard were made of vast stone blocks, and the temple itself was built of white marble which glistened in the sunlight. And yet, it is not in this vast temple building, but in the baby Jesus, that the glory of God is focused. Simeon cradles the little baby and says: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." This baby is quite literally God's instrument of salvation for the world. He is the one who will bring glory to Israel. Through him, the Gentiles, forbidden from entering the Jewish temple on pain of death, will be welcomed into relationship with Israel's God.

It is indeed quite mind-boggling to think, as the Christian church came to believe, that this baby was not only the son of Mary but the son of God, God made flesh. As our New Testament reading puts it: "Since we have flesh and blood, Jesus also shared our humanity, for he was made like us in every way." Some followers of Jesus came to wonder whether this could really be true. Perhaps, Jesus only really became Son of God at his baptism when he was an adult. That would be easier to understand. But the truth of the incarnation is that Jesus was Son of God from infancy, that he took our human flesh upon himself from the beginning, that it was in his utter vulnerability as a baby, lying there in Simeon's arms, that his glory, the glory of the only Son of the father was revealed. God makes himself known to us, not in the splendour of the wonderful temple buildings, but in a tiny baby. It is human flesh *itself*, that he invests with the highest dignity and the highest value.

That is why the Christian church today, likewise, places the highest possible value on human life. Compared with material things, we human beings are infinitely precious. Small babies and children are, in the same way, infinitely precious. Our real treasure lies not in buildings, in money, in wealth, but in people, and not least, in little people. The events in Dendermonde were the deepest kind of personal tragedy for the families involved and for the community. For they attacked the most precious thing we have: our children.

Sadly, the truth of our human situation is worse than this. For all around the world we in fact see children exposed to violence. The street children of South America; child soldiers in Africa, the thousands of children whose images are sold for use on the internet as pornography, the hundreds of children killed just these last few weeks in Gaza. Our Western European societies are not exempt from this. Scarcely a week goes by when the BBC does not report some new story of violence against a child. The London Times editorialist Robert Boyes comments: "The truth is that child abuse, infanticide and massacres have become part of the fabric of modern Europe. Children are now prime victims; while we have become more sophisticated over the past decade, kids have never been more vulnerable."

Children are people, like all of us. But they are especially vulnerable to adults when those adults are angry, or selfish, or violent. So children are people who need and deserve our care, our patience, our respect.

It seems a long way from Dendermonde to Davos. And perhaps it is. Certainly if you move in the heady world of limousines and posh hotels and business meetings it is possible to get disconnected from the flesh and blood realities of the ordinary lives which most people lead. One can start to live in a high altitude bubble.

But the financial crisis does, I believe, provide our world's leaders with an opportunity. It provides all of us with an opportunity. And several people have asked me recently, "What is a Christian response to the financial crisis?"

Perhaps the first way of responding is in repentance. We are in crisis now because people have done wrong. Individuals and governments have borrowed too much money. Banks have lent money to people who couldn't repay it. The motive for this has been greed. We need to turn away from our greed, from our obsession with money. As the Bible says, "the love of money is the root of all evil".

Secondly we should take the opportunity to reset our priorities. This is the moment to realise afresh that our real treasure lies in people and not in things. I am not exalting poverty; grinding poverty diminishes human flourishing. But as Augustine put it, "we should love people and use things, not love things and use people". The Western world has become highly sophisticated and high-tech, knowing how to create wealth, move money and manipulate investments in very clever ways. But it is not in financial markets that our real treasure lies. And for all our cleverness, we are far from finding ways of building community that lead to the welfare and flourishing of all people.

I used to have responsibility for a beautiful and very ancient church called St. Laurence in North East England. Our church was dedicated to a saint who lived in 3rd century Rome under the persecution of Emperor Valerian. During this time many wealthy Christians had their property removed from them. The story goes that one day the prefect of Rome demanded that St. Laurence turn over all the church's goods to him. Lawrence worked swiftly to distribute as much Church property to the poor as possible, so as to prevent it being seized by the prefect. On the third day, at the head of a small delegation, he presented himself to the prefect. When he was ordered to give up the treasures of the Church, he presented the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering. "These", he said, "are the true treasures of the Church".

And so, thirdly, what about a year, a 2009, in which we try and ask consistently about our own personal decisions, our church decisions, our public decisions: "Does this feel like something looks after our real treasure, something that keeps our real wealth safe: something that fosters the lives and welfare of the youngest and the most vulnerable?"

So: repent of our greed, re-set our priorities and actively focus on the well-being of our real treasure. Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Davos and Dendermonde: two towns that invite us to re-focus and re-prioritise. We are reminded today that the Son of God comes among us as a helpless, vulnerable baby. It is in and through this baby, this little person, that God begins his work of saving the world. He is our treasure, he is the glory of Israel. Our hearts will be in a very bad way if they are focused only on the state of our personal finances. They will be healthy if they are turned outwards in worship of God, and in the care and nurture of the real treasure, which is our fellow human beings.